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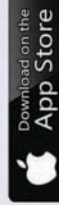
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CONTENTS

April 2022 Volume 15 • Number 5

FEATURES

- 34 THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERES!**
takt op.Destiny mixes up classical music and stunning animation.
- 78 TO CATCH A THIEF!**
Anime's most infamous master criminal returns in *Lupin the Third Part Six!*
- 84 THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS!**
NANA is a legendary shoujo anime series that should not be missed.
- 90 DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE**
There's lots to dig about *SAKUGAN*, including robots, monsters, and adventure galore.
- 94 SHOW AND TELL!**
There's a lot in *Komi Can't Communicate* that tends to be both whole, extreme, and ridiculous all at the same time. Does it get its point across?

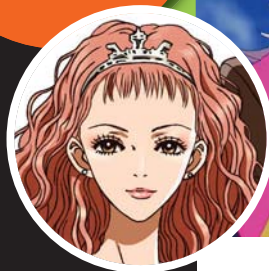
DEPARTMENTS

- 6 Editorial**
- 8 Letters**
- 10 Otaku Arsenal**
Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle

Manga Previews

- 39 ISLAND IN A PUDDLE**
Exclusive preview from Kodansha
- 55 WANDANCE**
Exclusive preview from Kodansha

- 98 Tokyoscope**
A smog monster, spider creatures, and funky yokai
- 108 Cosplay USA**
The Premade Life
- 112 Owari**
An interview with Jérôme Alquié about his new Space Pirate Captain Harlock comic



DIRECT FROM JAPAN

ANIME REVIEWS

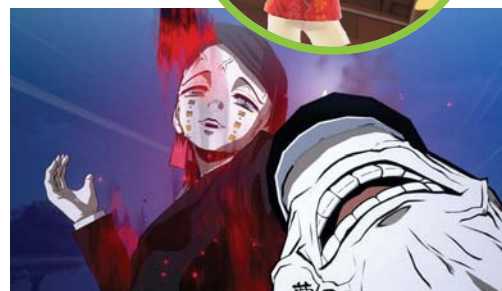
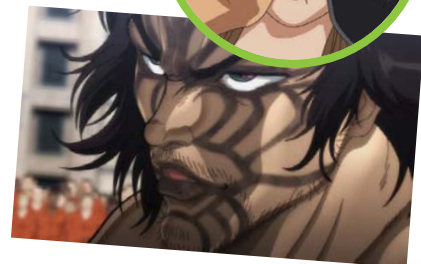
- 14** Ranking of Kings
16 Yakitate!! Japan
18 Baki Hanma
18 Memories
20 Haibane Renmei - The Complete Series
22 Mieruko-chan

MANGA REVIEWS

- 24** Kamen Rider: 50th Anniversary Edition
25 Robo Sapiens: Tales of Tomorrow
25 Baby Bear's Bakery
26 Frieren: Beyond Journey's End
26 F
26 You're My Cutie
27 A Masterful Cat Is Depressed Again, Today
27 The Girl, the Shovel, and the Evil Eye
28 Lupin III: Greatest Heists
28 Rosen Blood
29 When Will Ayumu Make His Move?
30 Pokemon Journeys
30 Cat + Gamer
30 Pokemon Pocket Comics: Sun and Moon
31 Doing His Best to Confess
32 You Are My Happiness
33 Love After World Domination
33 Akira Toriyama's Manga Theater
33 One Piece Pirate Recipes

GAME REVIEWS

- 102** Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaibo - The Hinokami Chronicles
103 Metroid Dread
104 Animal Crossing: New Horizons—Happy Home Paradise
104 Shin Megami Tensei V
106 Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water
106 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD



ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

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takt op.Destiny

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SAKUGAN

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LUPIN THE THIRD

PART 6 isn't the only Lupin saga that's making a splash at Sentai. See what else is in store for everyone's favorite gentleman thief at www.otakuusamagazine.com!

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Carl A. Gnam, Jr.
Editorial Director

Patrick Macias
Editor in Chief

Joseph Luster
Editor/Games & Website

Shaenon K. Garrity
Editor/Manga

Samantha DeTulio
Art Director

Contributors:

Ani-Mia, Jules L. Carrozza, Paul Thomas Chapman, Kara Dennison, David Estrella, Brianna Fox-Priest, Che Gilson, Michael Goldstein, Robert L. McCarthy, Daryl Surat, Jason Bradley Thompson, Danny Tanner, Brittany Vincent

Design Contributor
Dawn Stein

Production Assistant
Julian Gnam

Advertising Office
Diane Hintz
Advertising Director
(703) 964-0361

Ben Boyles
Account Executive
(570) 322-7848, Ext. 130
benjaminb@sovhomestead.com

Linda Galliher
Ad Coordinator
570-322-7848, ext. 160
lgalliher@sovmedia.com

Mark Hintz
Chief Executive Officer

Robin Lee
Bookkeeper

Subscription Customer Service
(800) 219-1187
sovereign@publishersserviceassociates.com

Comag Marketing Group
Worldwide Distribution

Sovereign Media Company, Inc.
6731 Whittier Avenue, C-100, McLean, VA 22101
(703) 964-0361

Subscription Customer Service and Business Office
2406 Reach Road, Williamsport, PA 17701
(800) 219-1187

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editorial

That Was the Year That Was

Hey! This is Patrick and hey, welcome to the latest issue of *Otaku USA* magazine! Once again, here we are to entertain you with our impressions of some of our very favorite things: Anime, Manga, Games, Cosplay, Toys, and whatever else we can scoop up in our mitts from the bin marked "Fun Stuff from Japan." If you're a new reader of our publication, welcome aboard! If you're a regular around these parts (or better yet, a subscriber!), good to see you back!

So, what do we have in store for you this time? Well ... *Lupin the Third Part Six* is our cover feature, and writer Daryl Surat is on the case with his two cents on the latest installment in this evergreen anime franchise. Up next, Kara Dennison picks up a conductor's baton and makes

sweet music with her take on *Takt op. Destiny*. Then, Brittany Vincent puts on a black leather jacket and rocks out to the classic shojou angst of Ai Yazawa's *NANA*. Then Michael Goldstein returns to the stage with a tag-team pair of features on *Sakugan* and *Komi Can't Communicate*!

In between these features, you'll find our usual departments

and regular columns, including anime reviews, manga reviews (and samples!), cosplay pics, and even live-action movie reviews! We hope your head won't spin too much from the sheer amount of *stuff* we have on display this week!

So, what else, you may ask, is going on? Well, right now, as I sit writing this, it is early December here in Japan. Thanksgiving is a bit of a non-holiday here, as you might imagine, and finding turkey and stuffing is something of a hassle. However, it's hard to ignore Christmas in Tokyo, with decorations and X-mas carols assaulting your senses everywhere you go. I have mixed feelings about this much Santa Claus and jingle bells to be honest.

One good thing about wintertime is the new season of anime that starts around this time of year. It's a bit early right now to say what the new breakout hit will be, but there's much buzz about the new *Stone Ocean* season of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* and the new anime from Studio Bones *Super Crooks*.

Either way, 2021 was an incredible year for anime, and I wonder if 2022 can possibly top it. At the movies, we got *Evangelion 3.0 + 1.01: Thrice Upon a Time*, *Mobile Suit Gundam Hathaway*, Mamoru Hosoda's *Belle*, and the runaway smash hit *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba Mugen Train Arc*, which opened in the USA last year as well.

What will 2022 bring? My guess is "more great anime!"

Until then, enjoy the new issue of *Otaku USA*!

—Patrick



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LETTERS/TEGAMI

Hey *Otaku USA*,

I really enjoyed J.L. Carrozza's review of *Evangelion 3.0 + 1.0: Thrice Upon a Time*.

However, it's recently come to my attention that in Stanley Kubrick (or George Lucas, for you younger filmgoers) fashion, Hideaki Anno has tweaked all four *Rebuild of Evangelion* entries (now renamed *Evangelion 1.11: You Are (Not) Alone*, *Evangelion 2.22: You Can (Not) Advance*, *Evangelion 3.33: You Can (Not) Redo*, and *Evangelion 3.0 + 1.0: Thrice Upon a Time*).

Would any of you be willing to write a deep dive review for an upcoming issue of *Otaku USA* that details all the changes these new versions bring to bear?

Cordially,
Julian

Hi Julian! Thanks for your letter! We'll let Mr. Carrozza know that you liked his feature on *Evangelion 3.0 + 1.0*. We agree that there's a fascinating world of different versions and minute differences to delve into when it comes to the *Rebuild of Evangelion* films. Interest and page space permitting, we're open to diving deeper if you're willing to go along with us! In the meantime, here's a pic from one of the *Rebuild* flicks!



Hi *Otaku USA*! Do you think you could do a review on the new anime *Blue Period*? I think that the show is intriguing, and while I'm watching it in weekly episodes, I think that it is great so far. Thank you!

-MnM

Hi MnM, thanks for your message! We confess that *Blue Period* is a show that we've somehow managed to miss in our pages. We hope to rectify that sometime soon! In the meantime, thanks for the tip, and enjoy the *Period* pic on this very page!



Thunderbolt Fantasy

Dear Sir or Madam,

I was greatly interested by Paul's letter about classic Gerry Anderson puppet shows in the last issue of *Otaku USA*. There is a lot more puppetry to be found in the weird and wonderful world of anime—Japan has a historic tradition of 'bunraku' puppetry, and your magazine has already highlighted Go Nagai's own Supermarionation show *X-Bomber* (AKA *Star Fleet*), but Gerry Anderson himself actually does have a direct anime connection! He was involved in the production of the anime series *Firestorm*, originally broadcast on the TV Tokyo channel in 2003 and directed by Kenji Terada. *Firestorm* was a more standard animated show, but after Mr.

Anderson's death in 2012 his company Gerry Anderson Productions brought *Firestorm* back in an outright Supermarionation revival, emulating *Thunderbirds* with puppets, physical sets, and practical special effects. Production of the series has been erratic, but several shorts were uploaded to YouTube over 2017-2020.

If Paul is into puppeteering, he may also be interested in the series *Thunderbolt Fantasy*. Created by the fan-favourite anime screenwriter Gen Urobuchi, it is a puppet show which takes *Thunderbirds* to the next level with a "wuxia" style of elaborate magical kung-fu. It is currently available to watch streaming online on Crunchyroll. I hope Paul finds these interesting places to start to bring his Western and Eastern interests together.

Yours Sincerely,
Robert

Hi Robert! Thanks for your letter and for schooling us on *Firestorm*! I didn't grow up with the Gerry Anderson shows, but I enjoy works like *Fireball XL5*, *Captain Scarlet*, *Joe 90*, and *UFO* a lot now that I am all grown up!

I agree that *Thunderbolt Fantasy* is a fantastic show that deserves more love (and viewers). We're going to put a pic from it here to hopefully entice more people to check it out! Thanks!

And there you have it ... more lucky letters rescued from the mail sack. Now give us more! Please send your questions, comments, queries, requests, and assorted ephemera to otakuusa@gmail.com!

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Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle

Pikachu Gets Fancy with \$25,000 Baccarat Crystal

Here's a taste of something fascinating that only a select few people around the world would even consider purchasing. *Pokémon* recently kicked its 25th anniversary celebration up a notch—especially if we're talking about price tags—thanks to a collaboration with Baccarat. That partnership



has resulted in a small collection, the physical size of which is the only thing about it that's modest.

At the center of it all is a \$25,000 Pikachu Fragment Crystal, which comes from Fragment Design and pioneering streetwear designer Hiroshi Fujiwara, who currently heads up the company. Fragment Design previously teamed up with Baccarat on red and clear crystal BE@RBRICKs, which were

priced at \$1,800 and \$1,500 each, respectively. That's nothing compared to the pure electric excess of this crystal 'Chu, though!

The Pikachu Crystal Fragment is 11.8 inches tall, 5.7 inches wide, and weighs 18.3 pounds. If it's too rich for your blood (we totally get it), the collection also includes Pikachu and Pokéball decorations that go for around \$400 each.

©2021 Pokémon / Nintendo / Creatures / GAME FREAK

Sample a Sip of Shin Megami Tensei V with this Sinister Sake



Shin Megami Tensei V brought the latest entry in Atlus's dark RPG series to Switch in November, but the celebration went above and beyond in Japan. Starting in December, pre-orders went live for *Shin Megami Tensei V* branded sake, complete with special bottle wrapping featuring the main character, the Nahobino.

Packaged comfortably in a wooden box, the sake—noted as officially graded "Daiginjo," which means all the rice used in the distilling process was milled down to at least 50 percent—is definitely of the premium variety. That type of distilling is more expensive, but results in a more fragrant and refreshing drink, so expect the "Nahobinokami" *Shin Megami Tensei V* version to reflect this in its price when it arrives.



© Atlus © SEGA

Mister SFC immortalizes Naruto in Specialty Jewelry Line

As if everyone's favorite orange-clad ninja—is there even any competition in this category?—needed help being immortalized! Just in case, though, men's jewelry brand Mister SFC has put together some immaculately detailed pieces based on Masashi Kishimoto's creation. The results are a new jewelry collection inspired by some key items from the *Naruto*

series, and the prices aren't too bad if you want to get in on these exceptional accoutrements.

Among the items are an earring and necklace based on Minato's Kunai, as well as a ring modeled after the Hidden Leaf Village shinobi headband, an earring and necklace inspired by Asuma's Chakra Blade, and a pair of pendants. One pendant evokes the One



Thousand Years of Death Jutsu hand sign, and the other is based on Naruto's Wind Release: Rasenshuriken attack. All of them are now available to purchase starting at \$32 per piece.



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OTAKU ARSENAL

JUJUTSU KAISEN FiguartsZERO Yuji Figure is Far from Cursed

There's a lot of responsibility that comes with owning a cursed item, but if there's some wick'd will o' wisp embedded within the latest figure of Yuji Itadori from *JUJUTSU KAISEN*, we're willing to take the risk. As one of the fresh additions to the awesome



FiguartsZERO line, Yuji stands at 7.5 inches tall, and is depicted releasing his devastating Black Flash attack to great effect.

In addition to the dynamic pose, that effect is achieved thanks to some well designed and placed translucent parts. The figure can typically be obtained for around US \$78, and Yuji is currently scheduled for a June 2022 release. Perfect for tiding us over until the next chapter of Gege Akutami's hit series!



© Gege Akutami/Shueisha, JUJUTSU KAISEN Project

It Figures!

Yuji Itadori, from the smash hit anime and manga series *Jujutsu Kaisen*, explodes into the Tamahsii Nations' FiguartsZERO line! This fixed-pose PVC figure captures the moment he releases his devastating Black Flash attack, using translucent parts to push the drama over the top! Standing 190mm tall and rolling out to customers in March 2022, Yuji is sure to be the centerpiece of your incredible *Jujutsu Kaisen* collection!



© Gege Akutami/Shueisha, JUJUTSU KAISEN Project

This is Not a Drill!

Hear ye, hear ye! The hit anime series *Sakugan* is making the way to collectable shelves via Tamahsii Nations' Robot Spirits line! Gaganba and Memenpu's Big Tony from *Sakugan* is a transforming robot that can switch from humanoid shape to vehicle mode in the blink of an eye. Big Tony also comes packed with plenty of accessories, including an optional pair of hands, drill parts, anchor wires, three optional expression parts, and even the pilots (Gaganba and Memenpu) themselves! Standing approximately 150mm tall, Big Tony is available now to have and to hold.



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Ranking of Kings

Earning massive points

Once upon a time in a faraway land, Prince Boji is the firstborn son of the dying King Bosse. While his father was known for his power and charisma back in his prime, Boji himself is deaf and cannot speak a few simple vocalizations, causing a lot of people to believe he's nothing more than a foolish simpleton. Few people bother to communicate with him, even his step-mother the Queen looks down on him. Despite his disability and all the negativity surrounding him, Boji is loving and loyal and dreams of becoming the greatest king the



STUDIO/COMPANY
Funimation

RATING
TV-14



world has even seen, and he believes he can achieve anything no matter what. All he has at his disposal are his kindness, his quick thinking, and a living shadow named Kage, who somehow understands Boji's aspirations.

I'm just going to say this up front: I'm not deaf, and my knowledge of sign language and the deaf community is rather limited, so my perspective on how the anime deals with Boji's deafness is going to be pretty limited in scope. While word is that the sign language in this show is being supervised by the Tokyo Federation of the Deaf, I myself cannot speak for just how well Boji's experiences speak for anyone else. Of course, I'm speaking about human beings that don't

have the entire weight of a country resting on their shoulders. And I'm certainly not going to compare this show to *Komi's Can't Communicate*, which happens to be airing alongside this show at the time of this writing; while communication is a huge part of their characters, both characters are treated with sympathy, Komi and Boji are very different creatures, so a comparison feels rather unfitting.

With that in mind, it's safe to say that *Ranking of Kings*—currently streaming on Funimation—knocks it out of the park. You'd be forgiven for thinking *Ranking of Kings* was some kind of children's short thanks to its animation, but Studio Wit—who previously did a little show called *Attack on Titan*—has

done an excellent job. The animation style manages to look more European than Japanese, feels simplistic in design but far more fluid when set in motion—the sword fight in the first episode in particular earning massive points—and really paints a dimension that wouldn't be too out of place in a Disney movie.

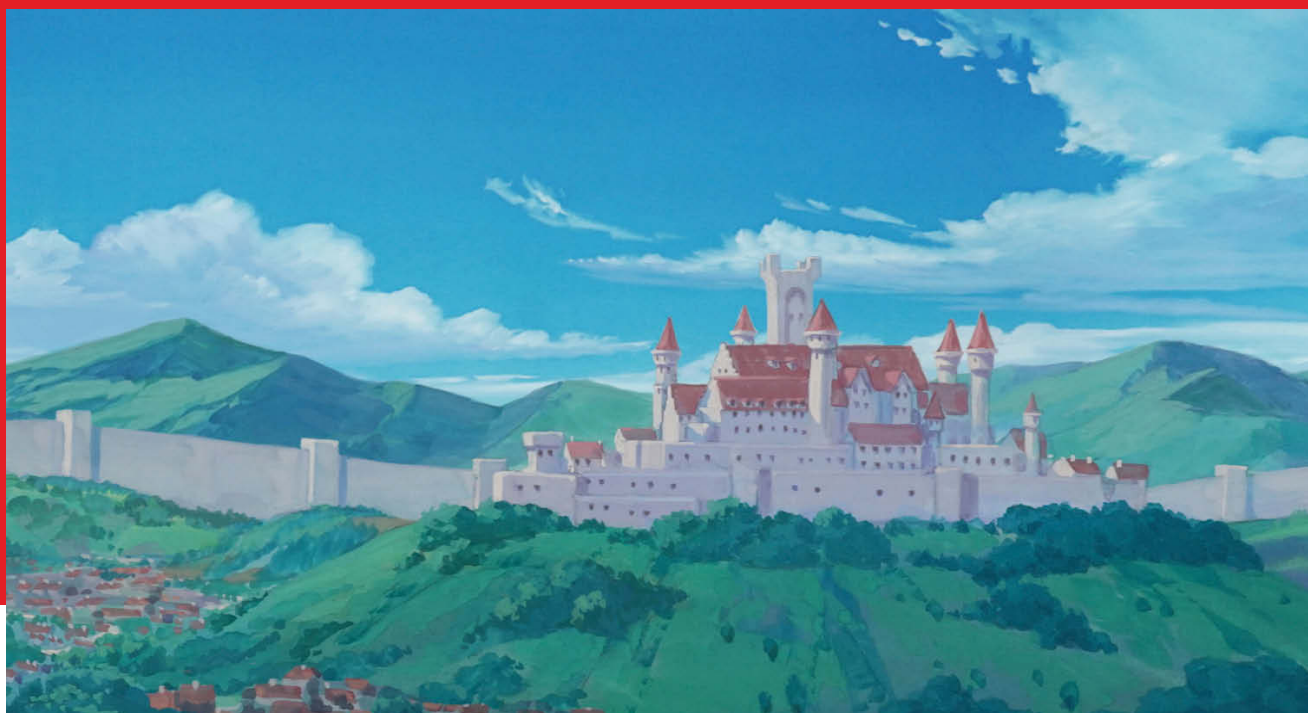
Come to think of it, "simplistic" isn't really the right word when describing this anime, because so far every character, even the ones we haven't been properly introduced to yet, have shown signs of being more than meets the eye rather than walking fairytale archetypes. No one in this series can be taken at face value. Not only that, when I say it looks like a

fairy tale, I'm not talking about Disney; I mean *Game of Thrones*-esque fairy tales—the kind that contain horrifying violence, and vile political backstabbing, and flawed characters (Kage's backstory is particularly gruesome).

And that's all I've really got to say. There's not really much in the form of a critique, since everything *Ranking of Kings* does has the goal of taking old-school elements, ripping them to shreds, and reassembling them into something unique. Based on the first five episodes, *Ranking of Kings* is number one on my list. There's still a lot of work for Boji and Kage to do, but I'll be rooting for them all the way.

Recommended.

—Michael Goldstein



Yakitate!! Japan

The sweet taste of victory



STUDIO/COMPANY
Crunchyroll

RATING
Not Rated

Long before *Food Wars!* was *Food Wars!* and the smell of a chicken was all it took to blast your clothes off, the closest thing we had to cooking shounen-style was *Yakitate!! Japan*, which came out all the way back in the ancient year of 2004, though the *Food Wars!* comparison is really just because of the food. *Yakitate!! Japan* is as shounen as they come; it's about youth, friendship, and hard work and the sweet taste of victory that accompanies it. All the staples are there—mean teachers, harsh rivals, tournaments, tough-as-nails training, and last-minute reveals.

It's also a shounen about bread. That's right—bread. And somehow, it makes something so nonsensical work pretty well.

Our story opens with Kazuma Azuma, who has the so-called "Hands of the Sun," hands that are far warmer than hands should be, prompting any

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dough he touches to ferment much faster than normal. In a world where each country has its own kind of bread, Kazuma is out to make a bread that can best represent Japan internationally; he even has a cute name for it: Ja-pan ("pan" means bread in Japanese). So he heads to Tokyo in the hopes of joining the world-famous bread-making Pantasia. Every character in this series bakes their bread with burning passion, but will Kazuma magic hands be enough to find fame and fortune in the competitive world of breadmaking? (Since this is a shounen anime, all signs point to yes).

Yakitate!! Japan is very silly, if you haven't already guessed. Though in its defense, it is technically billed as a comedy, the first layer of which is, naturally, its premise. All the classic shounen clichés are there; bread is at the heart of a tragic backstory; bread gives competitors their superpowers; and, much like *Food Wars!*, bread is the vessel of victory. And as far reactions to good-tasting bread go, this shows leans more toward over-the-top goofy in such a

way that isn't too uncomfortable. In a way it makes sense; breadmaking has always been its own extensive process.

Not only that, *Yakitate!!*, despite being pretty much a by-the-numbers-tournament-story, is shockingly articulate with its historical background. When you live in the country whose primary mode of carbs is the widely available rice, bread is bound to have some major competition. It even brings up the fact that the bread Japan introduced after the war was pretty tasteless due to its short shelf life, especially since wheat was hardly accessible in the country. In *Yakitate!!*, food is inseparable from the struggles of mankind and so easily affected by the politics and geography of the people who prepare it. It's one of many edutainment moments employed in an intriguing way, and it's done in such a way that doesn't really feel stale. This show understands that presentation is the key to anything.

Yakitate!!—currently streaming on Crunchyroll—is a show I wouldn't necessarily call a

must-watch, but I would say it's a great starting point for people just getting into anime, primarily due to its slower pace. Any newer shounen show would've crammed this stuff into half the amount of episodes it takes to

for this show to get through one arc, and I appreciate the show's desire to making sure its facts and humor land. I'll toast to this show any day.

—Michael Goldstein



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Baki Hanma

Fighters of impossible musculature

NETFLIX



STUDIO/COMPANY
Netflix

RATING
TV-MA

Since the creation of language, humanity has pondered deep and unanswerable questions: what happens when we die? What is the best way to live? And, most importantly, what do we talk about, when we talk about Baki? Based on the hyper-violent manga by Keisuke Itagaki about a teenage grappler who trains to avenge his mother's death (and his own attempted murder) at the hands of his deranged, martial artist father, Baki is many things to many people, but most of all, it is chaotic. Baki is so chaotic that when I first started watching *Baki Hanma*, the third and latest installment off Netflix's animated adaptation, I accidentally queued up the tenth episode by mistake. It took me eleven minutes to realize I'd started in the wrong spot, because Keisuke Itagaki's narrative style is unhinged, and the Netflix adaptation embraces that chaos with loving arms.

What do we talk about, when we talk about

Baki? Do we talk about the aesthetic, which makes a grotesquerie of human anatomy with its fighters of impossible musculature? Do we talk about the world it creates, which grants martial artists superhuman abilities that are completely nonsensical yet strangely plausible within its very specific context? Do we talk about the plot? Can we talk about the plot? In *Baki Hanma*, the titular character shadowboxes a make-believe, human-sized praying mantis. Afterwards, Baki kidnaps the President of the United States in order to get himself thrown into Super Jail(TM)



© Itagaki Keisuke (Akita Shoten) / Baki Hanma Production Committee



so he can challenge the second and third most powerful fighters in the world: Biscuit "Unchained" Oliva (aka Anime Carl Weathers by way of bodybuilder Sergio Oliva), a hulking mountain of a

Memories

See the technical commitment firsthand



STUDIO/COMPANY
Discotek Media

RATING
13+

Anthology films remain one of my favorite forms of Japanese animation, particularly when it comes to introducing prospective new fans intimidated at the prospect of watching a 12-26+ episode TV series. 1995's *Memories* consists of three short stories from talents now widely recognized as masters of their craft that either worked alongside Katsuhiro Otomo

of *Akira* fame or are him. Otomo has worked on several anime anthologies—*Robot Carnival*, *Manie-Manie Labyrinth Tales* (aka *Neo-Tokyo*), *Short Peace*—but the lengthier segments in *Memories* make it rank among his best.

By far and away the most well-regarded of the three shorts is the first one: "Magnetic Rose" directed by Koji Morimoto of Studio 4°C, written by the late Satoshi Kon as one of his earliest forays into animation (having previously assisted Otomo on his manga), and with an operatic score by Yoko Kanno (*Cowboy Bebop*), who had previously worked with Morimoto on *Macross Plus*. The reality-bending sci-fi psy-

chological drama focuses on a deep space freighter crew responding to a SOS call on what appears to be a derelict space station, but don't worry: it's only partially inspired by *Alien* rather

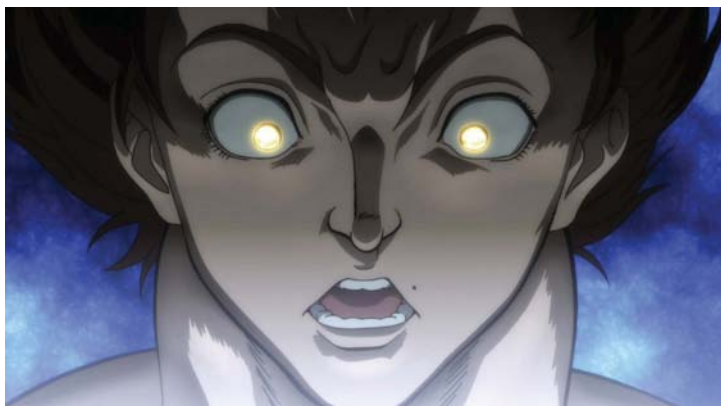
than being a direct knockoff. "Stink Bomb" directed by Tensai Okamura (*Darker Than Black*, *Blue Exorcist*) is about a hapless idiot who is too oblivious to realize that he is killing



© 1995 Mash Room/ Memories Production Committee

man whose pectoral muscles can repel shotgun pellets; and Jun Guevaru (aka Anime Che Guevara), a pirate who practices ninjitsu, the deadly art of assassination, thereby putting that age old Internet debate to bed.

What do we talk about, when we talk about Baki? Do we talk about the characters? We cannot talk about the characters. Keisuke Itagaki will not let us. Every time Itagaki introduces us to a supporting character who is more interesting than the schizophrenic mix of baby-faced cinnamon roll / martial arts murder-machine that is Baki Hanma, that character is immediately defeated, humiliated, and / or killed off in service to Baki's story. Even Baki seems aware of this contradiction, admitting that his as-yet-unrealized-in-the-anime ultimate confrontation with his father, Yujiro "Ogre" Hanma, is merely a glorified family quarrel. In *Baki Hanma*, Jun Guevaru is a much more compelling character: a high seas corsair who has staved off U.S. imperialism against his tiny island nation through the ruthless application of ninjitsu. Of



course Itagaki loses interest immediately, so Jun suffers a crushing defeat to Biscuit Oliva in order

to show how tough Baki has grown when our hero subsequently takes Oliva down a peg.

The Great Prison Battle Saga storyline adapted in *Baki Hanma* is not as wild and outlandish as the Most Evil Death Row Convicts Saga from the earliest Netflix series. There are fewer supporting characters to buoy up Baki's blandness, and the ones present are less bizarre and neurotic. Anyone with that shows a spark of quirkiness—such as the queer-coded trio Lips, Teeth, and Tongue who finish one another's sentences and who fight as a single unit known as "Mouth"—is immediately shoved aside to make more room for Baki. As in the previous season, Baki and Yujiro do not have their ultimate throw-down. They're still building to that, and so we'll have to wade through the "unfrozen cave-man" lunacy of the Pickle Arc before Baki and Yujiro throw hands. In theory, I love *Baki* in all of its gory glory, but in practice I'm hitting a point of diminishing returns. Each animated season is less zany than the one that came before. What can I say when I talk

about Baki, except that I want *Baki* to be better?
—Paul Thomas Chapman



everybody around him due to his BO having inadvertently become a vector for a bioweapon. Leave it to Katsuhiro Otomo to write a screenplay in which hundreds of thousands of people are killed, but it's a goofy comedy! I used to think nobody on the planet could possibly be this obviously stupid, but the COVID-19 pandemic has proven me wrong in this regard.

Finally, "Cannon Fodder" by Katsuhiro Otomo is a glimpse at what a society would be like if everything revolved around military industry: in this case, the production and firing of cannon munitions for the sake of a perpetual war against some nebulous unseen foe—listen, this was made years before 9/11 turned America into this very thing, okay?!—and the entire short is made to look as though it's all done in one continuous, uninterrupted shot. In fact, it nearly is: the entire storyboard is presented as an animatic bonus feature, where you can see the technical commitment firsthand.

While *Memories* has been released in the U.S. before on DVD, Discotek's Blu-Ray release is the definitive edition. They've restored the video to native high definition, including the use of AstroRes machine learning to upscale the CG elements originally rendered in standard definition. Don't worry: to avoid any "Star Wars Special Edition" style controversies, the original unaltered version is

also included on the disc. Also included on the disc are liner notes and a dedicated art gallery for each segment, as well as translated interviews with the three directors. But perhaps the most significant new feature that sets this release of *Memories* apart from any previous ones is the inclusion of an English dub, courtesy of the top-notch NYAV Post and Sound Cadence Studios. Both stereo as well as 5.1 surround options are available for the English dub as well as the Japanese, and if your preference is for the Japanese audio, you'll be pleased to hear that the English subtitle translation is also newly revised.

The anime anthology is becoming something of a relic of the past, kept alive these days primarily by way of co-productions with the West featuring established talent and established IP, such as the recent *Star Wars: Visions*. *Memories* embodies a different anthology tradition, most recently exhibited by the Japan Animator Expo shorts, in which new creative talents are showcased to tell groundbreaking tales. And yet it doesn't feel like "old anime"; despite being from over a quarter century ago, little in *Memories* comes off as particularly antiquated due to the uniqueness of the visual styles on display. Well, I suppose "display" is the notable exception; those big TVs and monitors are called "CRTs," kids! Ask your (grand?) parents who played *Super Smash Brothers Melee*.

—Daryl Surat



Haibane Renmei – The Complete Series

A nest of angels



STUDIO/COMPANY
Funimation

RATING
TV-14

Back in 1998, Yoshitoshi aBe made a name for himself as the character designer for *Serial Experiments Lain*; two years later, he showed the world his storytelling skills with the anime *NieA_7*. Around that time, he had a *doujinshi* project underway: *The Haibane of Old Home*. In 2002, the series would be adapted into *Haibane Renmei*,

exploring guilt and forgiveness through the eyes of a nest of angels.

Despite appearances, the haibane (“charcoal wings”) of the series aren’t actual angels. Their charcoal-grey wings sprout painfully from their backs not long after they break out of their cocoons, which appear in abandoned buildings. And their “halos” are forged for them, and take time to settle in place unaided over their heads.

As for who and what they actually are, even the haibane themselves aren’t sure. They have dreams as they wake up in their cocoons, and

receive names based on those dreams—like our protagonist, Rakka, who only recalls that she was falling. They live under strict rules in the city of Glie, imposed by the council whose name makes up the title. They may not handle money, own anything they did not make or receive secondhand, or touch the city wall. Eventually, ideally, each haibane will have their “Day of Flight”: the day on which they leave Glie, and their halo, behind, and fly over the city walls.

Rakka is our window into the world of the haibane, and Glie in general. There’s more to this city than meets the eye, and most of it is simply allowed to play out in front of us, free of exposition. The newly-minted haibane only get so much explanation themselves: each is clearly from somewhere else, with the knowledge that they have left another life behind. How much



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that previous life affects them can take a visible toll, and endanger their day of flight. Rakka learns, via her own experiences and those of fellow haibane Reki, what it means to be "sin-bound." At least, by this world's definition. By the end, *Haibane Renmei* is as much Reki's story as it is Rakka's.

It's tempting to delve into *Haibane Renmei* and "crack the code," as it were. If you're new to the series, you may expect the final episode to tie up all the secrets of the show's worldbuilding in a tidy, secondhand bow. But it won't. There's plenty to learn and glean as we follow Rakka through her daily life, her self-doubt, and her

darker moments. And overall, the show is an excellent exercise in "show, don't tell," as none of the characters *can* offer us any solid insight on the big secrets of Glie. But if you're watching for a big, detailed reveal, it isn't coming.

To say much more would be to spoil a beautiful watch. The show has all the beautiful aesthetic design we expect from aBe, paired with muted colors and an old European sensibility. The action plays out over a soundtrack composed by Kow Otani, who

also scored the video game *Shadow of the Colossus*. And while there are moments of tension, it moves at an overall soft and casual pace.

At 13 episodes, the series plays out relatively short and sweet. You won't receive a lore dump. No one will look you in the eye and tell you what the haibane are or why they're here. An observant viewer will put some pieces together: not enough to construct a full road map to the world of Glie and its ways, but enough to get the story told. In the end, it doesn't matter: *Haibane Renmei* may present an enchanting world full of secrets, but—as Rakka learns late in the series—focusing inward will bear more fruit than focusing outward.

It's a series that holds up to this day; and



nearly 20 years later, it's more than time for the haibane to spread their wings again and tell their story to a new generation. **Recommended**

—Kara Dennison

Mieruko-chan

A unique hybrid of horror and comedy



STUDIO/COMPANY
Funimation

RATING
TV-14

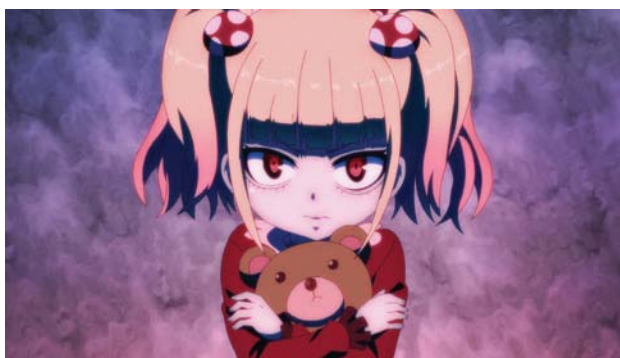
How would you react if, when walking home from school with your best friend, a grotesque, deformed spirit appeared in front of you? Would you scream? Would you cry? Many of us would more than likely turn tail and run. Not Miko Yotsuya, just your everyday high school student who can see the terrifying spirits of those around her. Whether that's a creepy,

intimidating presence invading her space or a massive being standing in the middle of the street, Miko can see them all. And throughout *Mieruko-chan*, she learns to cope with her terrifying new ability by doing the only thing she knows how to do: ignoring them all.

Mieruko-chan is a unique hybrid of horror and comedy that lets its heroine, Miko, shine in ways we don't normally get to see out of similar student protagonists. Instead of freaking out and screaming her head off when she realizes she can see the bone-chilling, disturbing ghosts around her, she simply behaves as though she



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can't. As we all know, that'd be nigh-impossible to do for many of us, simply because these spirits manage to manifest as what we'd consider to be jump scares.

A headless ghost appears when she opens a locker. A lascivious creature appears draped

around her best friend Hana Yurikawa's shoulders and between her breasts. These are hardly circumstances in which Miko would expect to be haunted, and yet she is anyway. It isn't very fun to be this poor girl when all she wants to do is take a bath but can't with spirits hanging out in the corner.

Each episode finds Miko looking for new ways to deal with the unwanted company she finds herself with, such as coping methods and new ways to ignore the spirits that plague her. She tries simply looking past them, a tactic made difficult when larger entities start blocking her path. She also tests prayer beads, more powerful pairs until the massive spiritual presence she carries with her even forces a flimflam woman to go "straight" with her mystic fortune

telling services. Nothing really works, and as the show carries on, you begin to wonder: what happens if Miko gives in and starts to interact with the ghosts instead of ignoring them? Is she in danger? Is there something they need from her? It's hard to tell, but the show does

keep you guessing.

Most of the humor is centered around Miko's random interactions with ghosts, though her best friend Hana is usually a major part of it. Dim-witted and fun-loving, Hana is usually the one chowing down on snacks and buying cute trinkets all while Miko tries to protect her from the spirits around her. When the pair make another friends to fill out the "trio" as seen in the anime's opening, Miko finds herself face to face with another individual who shares her same problem. From there, things go from standard format episodes with Miko simply dealing with her ability and trying to save Hana to more complex situations, and that's when things get even better.

It's a slow burn, and a one-note show at first, watching Miko come to terms with the fact, that, no matter what she does, she'll be stuck watching spirits try desperately to get her attention for the rest of her life. But when it subtly adds layers, like the death of her father, another student with the same set of issues, and even more interesting ghosts, *Mieruko-chan* subtly transforms into an extremely fun ride. It's spooky, giggle-worthy, and a scary little delight to look forward to coming around every week. At least Miko's the one dealing with spirits, not us.

—Brittany Vincent

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Manga + Otaku

New Manga Reviews



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Shotaro Ishinomori

RATING
10+

Kamen Rider: 50th Anniversary Edition

Despite holding a Guinness World Record for most comics published by a single creator (770!), the late Shotaro Ishinomori remains primarily remembered in America for his pioneering work on live-action *tokusatsu* shows, with his manga only sporadically available in English. Following its recent release of his *Gorenger* manga, Seven Seas

Entertainment now brings us a complete edition of the King of Manga's other most enduring superhero in one massive tome spanning over 850 pages: 1971's *Kamen Rider*!

The evil secret organization Shocker seeks to commit grand-scale environmental desecration in the name of ultra-capitalism, through a combination of covert brainwashing with cybernetics and animal/insect genetic hybridization. Biology student Hongo Takeshi is mortally wounded and abducted by Shocker, which replaces his body with a superhuman cybernetic frame akin to that of a grasshopper. Using a highly advanced motorcycle, Hongo escapes from their clutches before he can be brainwashed and vows to obliterate all of Shocker as Kamen Rider, Mother Nature's wind-empowered messenger and defender of justice! But Shocker has plenty of



© Shotaro ISHINO MORI / ISHIMORI PRODUCTION

augmented superpowered troops to throw at him, whose resemblances to any famous American superheroes are ... well, there's "Man-Spider" and "Man-Bat" (not Kirk Langstrom), so you get the idea.

The copious use of splash pages, fight scenes, and action sequences easily summarized as "motorcycles being ridden" ensures that *Kamen Rider* is a fast, enjoyable read even at its massive length. Seven Seas preserves the color pages and also includes the very short and more sanitized *Kamen Rider* comics used to directly promote the television show's broadcast time and channel. But make no mistake: *Kamen Rider* set the template for an entire field of otaku obsession, and its darker themes and plotting that eventually diverge from the more lighthearted live-action series give it a contemporary feeling even 50 years later. Be sure to read this before seeing Hideaki Anno's upcoming *Shin Kamen Rider* movie. **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)



Robo Sapiens: Tales of Tomorrow

Beautiful and melancholy, this millennia-spanning graphic novel will have readers pondering everything from the nature of sapience to the extinction of humanity. Shimada delicately navigates interlinked stories that fit together like a crystalline puzzle. Each chapter is a glimpse of a farther and farther future as AI technology

advances. But there's no robot rebellion, no mass slaughter, simply a rising and thriving of robot sentience as humans fizzle out. What little violence haunts the background is presented to readers in exposition as the AIs update their lost, mission-directed ancestors on the state of the world every few hundred years.

In some ways this is challenging book to digest. Simultaneously sad and hopeful, it's a bittersweet odyssey through the future. Thoughtful, gentle, and exquisitely crafted, it deservedly won the Division Grand Prize at Japan Media Arts Festival. Shimada's art echoes, in the best possible way, the legacy of Osamu Tezuka. The clean, simple art, stripped of detail but perfectly developed, is reminiscent of *Astro Boy* and other classic science-fiction manga of the '50s and '60s. Shimada creates a fully realized world from spare lines and perfectly balanced black-and-white contrasts. The text is treated as a design element, adding another visual layer. The pacing and the management of the multiple story lines are handled with expert precision. Just as the reader is asking, "Whatever happened to ...?" the next chapter returns to that character.

Robo Sapiens is a flawlessly cut diamond. Plot, art, and pacing work together to create a

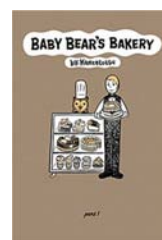


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book that will consume readers for days after they put it down. This manga asks big questions about sentience, the future of humanity, and the beating heart of what makes life *life*. Anyone who loves hard SF with a philosophic bent can happily add this to their permanent collection. **Recommended.** (Che Gilson)

Baby Bear's Bakery

In the first strip in this four-panel manga collection, a sign on a bakery wall warns: "This store is run by a bear." Sure enough, up pops a little Paddington-like bear in a chef's hat, eager to serve up pastries. The bear is a talented baker but doesn't know much about running a business or even how money works, so a nondescript, unnamed customer helps him out, then joins the



PUBLISHER
Denpa

STORY AND ART
KamenTotsu

RATING
All Ages

bakery as a bow-tied server and assistant. And so, the bear cub and the young man become colleagues and friends, sharing the quiet pleasures of daily life.

On the manga gag strip scale from "actually trying to be funny" to "just here to show you some cute cartoons," *Baby Bear's Bakery* lands firmly on the side of cuteness. The jokes are so mild they're barely jokes at all. Running gags include: the bear doesn't understand the human world (or anything besides baking), the bear collects leaves and

acorns, the bear is very small, the bear likes treats. When the bear signs documents with a pawprint instead of a personal seal, it's adorable, but no one is about to bust a gut laughing. He also speaks in baby talk ("Hewwo, this is the bakery"), which can grow annoying. Artist Kamen-Totsu soon runs low on bakery-specific setups and leans into the seasonal plots—the bear enjoys autumn leaves; the bear learns about Santa Claus—that tend to overtake manga that don't have much else going on.

But darn it, the artwork is almost fatally cute. KamenTotsu draws everything with childlike simplicity except for the bear, whose shaggy hair, shiny black eyes, and wee fangs are rendered in loving detail. Spot color gives the bear's friend blond hair and the bear a coat of golden fur. The seasonal material may be cliché, but it meshes well with the strip's mellow, contemplative mood and fondness for nature. Nothing in *Baby Bear's Bakery* is in any danger of causing too much excitement, but readers get to enjoy cute animals, tasty-looking baked goods, soothing small-town life, and warmhearted declarations of friendship. There's also a rabbit who runs a market, so it's got that going for it. (Shaenon K. Garrity)



Frieren: Beyond Journey's End

Frieren: Beyond Journey's End begins at the end of a fantasy epic. A standard RPG hero team has, after a decade of questing together, defeated the fearsome Demon King. The kingdom builds statues and throws celebrations in honor of Himmel the hero, Heiter the priest, Eisen the dwarf warrior, and Frieren the elven mage. Then the party ends and the four go their

separate ways. But, as in *Lord of the Rings* or *Dungeons & Dragons*, elves in this fantasy world live much longer than humans. Frieren is destined to outlive not only her companions, but the memory of their deeds.

At first glance, *Frieren* looks like a generic fantasy manga, the kind with a tie-in light novel series and pervy merchandise of the female characters. But, though there's plenty of magic and monster-fighting, the mood is thoughtful, warmly melancholy, and focused less on the action than on the slow thaw of Frieren's icy reserve as the decades slip by. As a gesture to her former teammates' memory, she takes on an apprentice, a human girl named Fern with magical talent. Together they wander from town to town, facing magical challenges great and small, from cleaning a neglected monument to battling a legendary demonic mage. Wherever they go, Frieren encounters reminders of her old quest, which doesn't seem long ago to her but is already pass-

ing out of human memory. The concept of a near-immortal trying to understand mortal life is reminiscent of *To Your Eternity*, but *Frieren* is much less intense, with bloodless fantasy action and a low-key atmosphere of nostalgia.

The other element that makes *Frieren* stand out from standard RPG manga is the exceptional art. The character designs are on the bland side, but their European-style fantasy world is beautifully drawn, providing the cast with an absorbing environment to explore. Artist Tsukasa Abe lavishes enough detail on stock settings—medieval castles, Renaissance cities, adventurers' taverns, cottages in the woods—to make them feel real and lived-in. The characters age as the manga continues, except for Frieren, the one constant in the changing human world. Fantasy fans looking for a smart, well-crafted twist on the conventions of the genre will want to follow this adventure. (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER
Glacier Bay
STORY AND ART
Imai Arata
RATING
Unrated/Mature

F

In an alternate universe that looks like it was sketched in a war zone, the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake led to civil war in Japan. John Cantlie, a British photojournalist (named after a real-life journalist held captive by ISIL), goes undercover in the newly independent Tohoku region and is set upon by rival factions of militias. The most powerful of these is the ruthless State of F, a

regime led by foreign mercenaries who turned against the Japanese rebels and seized control. Cantlie's search for a missing fellow journalist hurls him through one harrowing situation after another and finally lands him in a POW camp, where F plans to use him for its own ends.

A true specimen of alternative manga, *F* was originally self-published for an art installation by an artist who specializes in creating documentaries and pseudo-documentaries in a variety of media. Its harrowing vision of Japan as a war-torn failed state is partly a critique of the Japanese government's piecemeal response to the earthquake and subsequent nuclear plant meltdown, partly a full-throated attack on American militarism past and present. The U.S. responds to the crisis by carpet-bombing Tohoku, and Cantlie writes from the front that "this plays perfectly into the hands of F, which is very happy to sit back and watch the West bankrupt itself fighting them." As global powers respond to force with force, the bloody rebellion in Japan threatens to set off WWII.

Arata's wild, scribbly artwork serves his story, creating a relentless mood of panic and desperation. Objects and figures emerge from a chaos of scratchy lines, sketches erupt into crude explosions, and characters stare from the havoc with

haunted eyes. But Arata knows when to pause the action to establish a moody setting of overgrown countryside and bombed-out city streets, familiar modern-day landscapes reduced to ruin.

F doesn't shy away from brutal material—war, torture, executions—but the tone is less shocking than it is grimly resigned to the realities of modern conflict. The edition from Glacier Bay includes an essay by translator Ryan Holberg, "So Let the Nightmare for Japan Begin," providing extensive background on Arata's historical and political influences. It's easy for Western fans, mostly exposed to mainstream manga for teens, to imagine Japanese pop culture as a toothless, apolitical safe space. Manga like *F* are a welcome sock to the jaw. **Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER
Kodansha
STORY AND ART
Nakaba Harufuji
RATING
13+

You're My Cutie

Madoka loves shojo manga, especially the ones where a kohai falls for their senpai. She knows all the harem types like the back of her hand but has an affinity for pure, innocent young men who fit the "good boy" trope. "I wanna laugh and play around with younger guuys," she moans. This love spills off the pages of her favorite manga and into everyday life as she

sets out on a mission to find her own kohai sweetheart—if she can only find the time.

When she's not in school, daydreaming about underclassmen, Madoka works at her family's restaurant. Time that could be spent flirting is expended on sweeping floors and bussing tables—hardly a meet-cute opportunity. Or is it? Madoka finally meets someone blush-worthy when her father, hoping to please his daughter, hires a cute young guy as his new part-timer. The problem is that he's cold, standoffish, and quick to anger, the opposite of Madoka's fantasy. In classic shojo manga fashion, the two polar opposites are forced to work together while Madoka complains that Shikura is *totally* not her type (are you rolling your eyes yet?). Anyone with the slightest familiarity with romantic comedies can guess what happens next.

Shikura fits nicely into the tsundere role. He's hot-tempered and guarded but shows a softer side as he and Madoka get to know each other. We learn that Shikura's walls are up because he doesn't trust girls; he's a popular guy at school, but girls tend to go overboard around him. Madoka tries to keep her distance and avoid getting too close, but the unlikely pair feels a stronger pull than either of them expected.

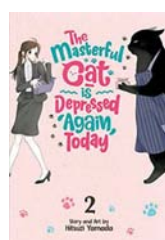
You're My Cutie is predictable at every turn, but for romance fans who love all the clichés, it's a light, sweet read. Every moment Madoka or Shikura let down their guard feels like a little vic-



© Nakaba Harufuji /Kodansha Ltd.

tory. The small moments of budding romance are heartwarming, while the comedy helps carry the story and make the characters more lovable. Special moments like shopping together, followed by funny bits like Shikura getting lost while chasing a cat, remind me why I love shojo manga.

There's a special art to crafting a light, effortless-feeling manga. The panels may not have grandiose action, but the characters' expressions, internal dialogue, and small movements have great impact. When you can "hear" the panels come to life, that's when a manga-ka has created an effective story, and Nakaba Harufuji certainly has. If shojo is your go-to, and you especially love "not my type" romantic pairings, you'll feel right at home with *You're My Cutie*. (Brianna Fox-Priest)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Hitsuzi Yamada

RATING
Teen (13+)

The Masterful Cat Is Depressed Again, Today

Overworked office drone Saku is finally starting to get her life together. She gets a full night's sleep, shows up to work with perfectly packed bento lunches, and goes home to a tidy apartment. When she mentions her beloved cat, Yukichi, a coworker scoffs, "Living alone with a cat?"

You're basically broadcasting that you've given up on marriage!" But Saku doesn't mind being a cat lady, because Yukichi, a six-foot feline who walks upright and is dexterous

enough to handle chopsticks, is the secret behind her improved lifestyle. He cooks, cleans, does laundry, and even sews, all to ensure that his mistress can hold down her job and keep bringing home the cat food.

The Masterful Cat Is Depressed Again, Today is a sweet-tempered wish-fulfillment fantasy. Wouldn't it be helpful if the family pet straightened up your home while you were out, instead of lounging around getting hair on everything? Yukichi doesn't speak and indulges in a few feline habits, like sitting on Saku's head to wake her up in the morning. But otherwise, he's a cross between a mom and a butler. Despite the title, he's seldom depressed, merely frustrated when Saku works late, comes home drunk, or otherwise disrupts the domestic bliss he works so hard to create.

As with *Way of the Househusband* and its yakuza homemaker, *The Masterful Cat* bases its comedy on the juxtaposition of an unconventional character doing mundane housework. But *Masterful Cat* is milder and less imaginative, hoping that readers will simply enjoy the cuteness of a gigantic cat going about domestic tasks like grocery shopping ("There is no way that's a cat trying to choose between two heads of cabbage!!") or watching daytime TV for cooking tips.

Even if *The Masterful Cat* doesn't push the comedy potential of its premise as much as it could, it's funny and charming. A manga this gentle and insular risks running out of steam, but Hitsuzi Yamada keeps Volume 1 humming along with running plots like Saku's blossoming workplace romance and her investigation into the mystery of how Yukichi grew from an apparently normal kitten into a "masterful cat." Goofy side gags like a sea-slug-themed idol group help keep the good times rolling. The human character designs are uninspired, but Yukichi, who looks like the kind of big, cuddly animal companion Rumiko Takahashi sometimes draws, is fun to look at, and his sardonic expressions hit a perfect balance between human and cat. No self-respecting real cat would be this helpful, even if it could be. But cat-lovers can always dream. (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER
Kodansha

STORY
Chouchouhassha

ART
Kayatamaru

CHARACTER DESIGN
Chibi

RATING
16+

The Girl, the Shovel, and the Evil Eye

After Tsuguto Sumihara lets a bully chase him from his seat on the bus, the bus crashes and Tsuguto takes the brunt of the damage. As he bleeds to death in front of the other passengers, the bully who took his seat films Tsuguto's last moments. Overcome with rage, Tsuguto perishes, only to find himself transplanted to—you guessed it—a fantasy land full of strange creatures,

magic and dungeons.

Lost in a generic RPG, Tsuguto struggles to make money mining crystals. Fortunately, he meets a little girl with sheep horns named Loulier who can sense the crystals. She helps Tsuguto make enough to get by and acquaints him with the new world he seems to be trapped in. Together they face up to a bully in the mines, and Tsuguto discovers he has the special ability to curse people. Eventually he and Loulier decide to level up and become adventurers. Of course, this is only the beginning of their journey.

The Girl, the Shovel, and the Evil Eye is well-written, and the main characters are sympathetic. It's nice to see a friendship rather than romance develop in an isekai, a genre too often dominated by harems and fanservice. Instead, Tsuguto is compassionate and his past experience as a victim of bullying gives him a concrete motivation to help himself and Loulier grow stronger. The art is excellent, though the few monsters featured are of little visual interest. Loulier is adorable, with big fluffy hair and horns. Smooth inks blend with pleasing character designs and clean layouts to create an enjoyable reading experience. While this book doesn't break new ground, it's a step above many of its fellows in the genre. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment
STORY AND ART
Monkey Punch
RATING
13+

Lupin III: Greatest Heists

It's been nearly 20 years since Tokyopop released the original *Lupin III* manga in English for the first time. American readers, perhaps put off by the difference between the raunchy 1960s manga and its family-friendly anime adaptations, failed to embrace it, and hardly anyone was paying attention when the more palatable sequel series *New Lupin the Third* was released

under the name *Lupin III: World's Greatest*. But now, 54 years after the character's creation, U.S. fandom for the world's greatest thief is the strongest it's ever been, so Seven Seas Entertainment is testing the waters with *Lupin the Third: Greatest Heists*, a curated single-volume collection of twelve noteworthy chapters selected when creator Kazuhiko Kato, a.k.a. "Monkey Punch," passed away in 2019.

The chosen stories are, for the most part, a combination of first appearances by popular characters and source material for some of the most iconic installments of the TV anime (the car race, the magician, Jigen's duel as he reassembles his gun). Some of the stories are fairly old, so it was smart to open with a story from *New Lupin the Third* that features the entire core gang in recognizable incarnations of themselves. The quality of the printing and the English translation are a noticeable upgrade

© Monkey Punch



over the old Tokyopop releases, and this edition is offered as both a physical high-end hardcover and a digital edition available through online storefronts such as Comixology.

Perhaps readers weren't ready for *Lupin III* manga all those years ago. But now that most of the *Lupin* anime is readily available in the U.S. in streaming and physical media, it's the perfect time to bring back the manga. Hopefully, further *Lupin* manga releases await us. Personally, I'd be fine if they focused on *New Lupin the Third*, most of which has never been translated.

Recommended. (Daryl Surat)

Rosen Blood

After a carriage accident strands Stella in a strange mansion at the center of a thorny forest, her life takes a mysterious and deadly turn. With no family or friends to rely on, Stella begs her



PUBLISHER
Viz Media
STORY AND ART
Kachiru Ishizue
RATING
Teen +

sexy benefactor Levi-Ruin for a job as a maid. With that, her fate is sealed. Levi introduces her to his housemates, three other extremely handsome men who all comment on how delicious Stella smells and how delectable her flesh looks (hint number one that she should run). One of them, Gilbert, takes his overtures too far and attacks Stella (hint number two). The enigmas of the mansion pile up: Gilbert's

stunningly realistic statues, the lack of food in the kitchen, and Stella's hosts' diet of crystalline candies. Slowly Stella realizes she's in grave danger. But with nowhere to go, and romance

blooming between herself and Levi, she doesn't consider fleeing. As it turns out, she may never be able to leave.

Lovely to look at, *Rosen Blood* is a gothic mystery heavy on atmosphere. The art is beautiful and detailed, enhancing an enchanting plot that whispers of danger and intrigue. The other-worldly beauty of Levi and his compatriots is made clear in the artwork; Ishizue lavishes attention on their ridiculous good looks with detailed art, hot costumes, and loving closeups. The downside is that they look similar and tend to blend together when more than one of the male leads is on the page at a time.

The pacing is fast and none of the mysteries are left to linger for long. Ishizue excels at pretty character designs, but the backgrounds aren't neglected, and the book has a consistent sense of place. The central romance is a little clunky; Stella's initial issue with Levi is that he's harsh,

but his "mistreatment" amounts to a snarky comment and being slightly withdrawn. Inevitably, because this is a shojo manga, Levi finds himself drawn to Stella while keeping a dark secret that could sever their growing bond. At the same time, of course, there's potential for complications with any of the other guys. Despite some flaws, Ishizue has crafted a seductive, dark fairy tale. (Che Gilson)

When Will Ayumu Make His Move?

When Will Ayumu Make His Move? is a romantic comedy manga in which two high school students wait for each other to make a move, in shogi and in love. Their days are rife with miscommunications as they pass the time playing in the shogi club room after school. Although they both clearly like each other, their inexperience in matters of love makes even minor situations blow up into painful, awkward ordeals. Ayumu



PUBLISHER

Kodansha

STORY AND ART

Soichiro Yamamoto

RATING

13+

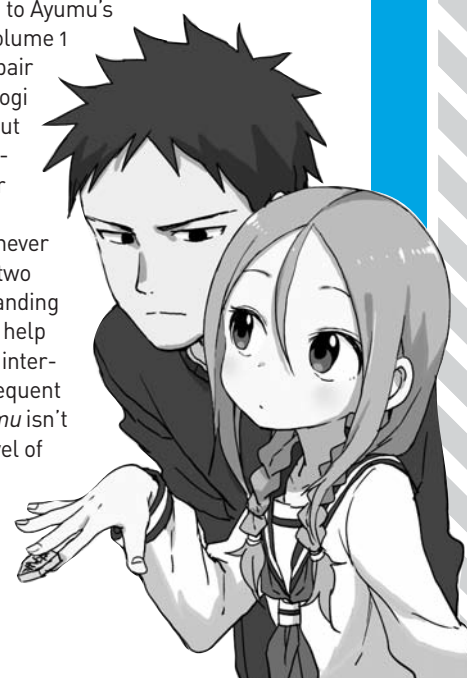
has vowed not to confess his feelings to his upperclassman Urushi until he beats her in a shogi match, and every interaction becomes a game of attrition with neither side relenting.

In a refreshing shift from the usual manga archetypes, the heroine is the one on the offensive and Ayumu plays defense against her strategic advances. With her braided pigtails, broad forehead, and

petite stature, Urushi's cute, diminutive design belies her glass-cannon approach to making Ayumu slip up and admit his feelings for her. Unfortunately for her, Ayumu is as thickheaded as boys get. Even though he's in plainly love with her, he refuses to act on any chances to advance his relationship with his shogi partner. His stony-faced defense is coupled with a tendency to parry Urushi's attacks with blunt compliments that send her head spinning.

The first volume of *Ayumu* is a solid manga from a proven creator, but it occupies a niche that's getting crowded these days. Soichiro Yamamoto has the dynamic down pat after authoring *Teasing Master Takagi-san* and knows how to sell jokes by counterbalancing Urushi's expressiveness with Ayumu's stubborn poker face. The first volume of this light story clocks in at a trim 150 pages, even including a crash course in shogi rules. It's not necessary to understand shogi to appreciate this manga, but once in a while specific shogi tactics are key to a punchline. Otherwise, the couple's banter keeps the book moving along without getting bogged down in the fine details of the game.

For readers who can't get enough of rom-com manga featuring reluctant non-couples talking around their feelings, *Ayumu* can tide one over between releases of other, beefier books. Urushi frequently threatens to find more members for the shogi club, to Ayumu's chagrin, but Volume 1 ends with the pair still playing shogi together without much interruption from other characters. *Ayumu* might never grow past the two leads, but expanding the cast might help keep the story interesting in subsequent volumes. *Ayumu* isn't quite at the level of established, popular rom-coms like





CAT + GAMER © 2019, 2021 by Wataru Nadatani

Kaguya-sama or the author's own Takagi-san, but it's a pleasant read in its own right with room for growth. (David Estrella)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media

STORY AND ART
Michito Gomi

RATING
All Ages

Pokémon Journeys

The journey to catch 'em all continues in this manga adaptation of the *Pokémon Journeys* anime. Ash dreams of being a Pokémon Master, while Goh wants to collect one of every Pokémon, including the legendary Mew. Together they become research fellows under Professor Cerise in Vermillion City. The Professor sends them on trips to locales around the world, giving Ash

and Goh the opportunity to meet new Pokémon, catch them, and train them.

While other *Pokémon* manga and anime tend to center on specific regions of the expansive Pokémon universe, *Journeys* departs from this formula. Ash and Goh become globetrotting trainers, traveling to regions both familiar and

new. The newest region they visit in Volume One is Galar from the *Sword and Shield* games. Those looking for a deep dive into Galar will be disappointed, but anyone who's watched the anime will find a faithful and streamlined adaptation of that story arc.

None too challenging, the book is definitely aimed at younger audiences, but there's an elegant simplicity to the artwork and stories. The explanations of the Pokémon world, borrowed directly from the anime, are repeated a bit too often, especially since by now it seems unlikely that any new readers, however young, will be unfamiliar with the basic concept. This series also introduces new ways to battle, including Gigantamax Pokémon. And no Pokémon saga would be complete without Team Rocket. Jesse, James and Meowth are in fine form, accompanied by a capsule vending machine which dispenses a variety of Pokémon for them to battle with.

Gomi's art is accurate to *Pokémon* game and anime character designs, employing strong design and thick, vibrant linework. Adults who may be a little old for the stories can still enjoy the artistry and skill Gomi brings to the universe. The Pokémon look great, and the battles are dynamic. There's plenty of humor, and the characters' bug-eyed cartoony reactions to extreme emotions earn a chuckle. Full of heart, ambition, and friendship, *Pokémon Journeys* is a charming family-friendly adventure. (Che Gilson)

Cat + Gamer

Riko, a buttoned-down office worker, brushes off social invitations and clocks out at 5:00 on the dot. Her coworkers gossip that she must have a boyfriend, but in reality, she hurries home, throws on sweats, and settles in for her nightly routine of hardcore online gaming. She has her life set up just the way she likes it, so when a stray kitten is found in the office parking lot, Riko surprises herself and everyone else by volunteering to adopt it. "W-will I really be able to handle this enigmatic creature?" she wonders.



PUBLISHER
Dark Horse

STORY AND ART
Wataru Nadatani

RATING
Unrated/Teen

That's as high as the stakes get in *Cat + Gamer*, a gentle slice-of-life comedy with only two real characters, cat and woman, and no conflict beyond their good-natured efforts to live together. Raising a kitten is depicted as fun and pleasant, but it's still a challenge for Riko, who's used to being alone in her cozy cocoon of an apartment and isn't sure how to care for another living thing. The running

joke is that she treats pet ownership as an RPG she can master. "I'm going to max out this cat!" she declares, and proceeds to deal with challenges like treating fleas, buying cat toys, and naming her new pet as miniquests. The kitten, meanwhile, makes a delightful gaming companion, even if he bats at Riko's controller and curls up on the warm console at inconvenient times. Before long, Riko is turning into a cat person and trying to hide her new soft spot from her coworkers.

Warm-hearted and relentlessly charming, *Cat + Gamer* invites readers to drop in on a cute nerd-girl, her cute pet, and their pleasant life together in a bachelorette apartment with an enviable gaming rig (plus the fancy food and sake Rika splurges on to celebrate her online victories). Wataru Nadatani's detailed, seinen-style art plays up expressions and body language effectively enough that scenes of Rika sitting around playing video games come off as dynamic. He particularly excels at drawing the kitten, capturing poses and behavior any cat lover will recognize. ("The way you bend, you're like a mollusk!" Rika marvels.) *Cat + Gamer* is a sweet, funny escape that will appeal equally to cat fans, gaming fans, and fans of beautifully crafted manga. **Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garritty)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media

STORY AND ART
Santa Harukaze

RATING
All Ages

Pokémon Pocket Comics: Sun and Moon

Pokémon Pocket Comics: Sun and Moon is a collection of short comics featuring Pokémon from the seventh generation of the long-running game series, along with a number of favorites from the past. None of the trainers show up, so it's all Pokémon, all the time. Created with younger readers in mind, *Sun and Moon* isn't meant for the

grumpy oldsters who still break out the gray brick Game Boy for a session of *Gold and Silver*, but it's a weird enough book that it might amuse curious older fans.

The localization team deserves credit for making the brave attempt to rework the countless



Japanese pun-based gags into jokes that can be understood by American kids. That's not to say the humor hits the mark every time, but I recognize the amount of work that goes into translating this type of material. The original Pokémon names are often onomatopoeia and puns themselves, so wordplay that makes perfect sense in Japanese has to be rewritten to make sense in English while remaining more or less faithful to the spirit of the original. Sometimes the script abandons any attempt to construct a pun and

simply hacks a chunk off a Pokémon's name to get it to read like another word. Puns for a name like Litten write themselves, but you can see where the translation team started to sweat once they got to Necrozma and Suicune.

Sun and Moon is almost 200 pages of Pokémon punning with a few breaks for the kids to do simple activities, like identifying Pokémon silhouettes or completing a maze, which can probably be done in five seconds by any child with basic reading skills. The art is simple and bold,

emphasizing the round, colorful look of the cartoon over some of the more stylized depictions in other Pokémon manga. Occasionally, corners are cut and some of the drawings are recycled or lifted from game art. As disappointing as this padding is, children may not be discerning enough to notice it.

Reading *Sun and Moon* as a full-grown adult makes me feel like the guy who's more excited for the piñata at the birthday party than the kids themselves. I enjoy the little details that would be meaningless to younger readers, like seeing an accurate map of the Kanto region included for the sake of a quick reference. While it may be going too far to call *Sun and Moon* a hidden gem in the overflowing river of Pokémon content, it has a high Pokémon-to-page ratio to delight young fans and it's good for a chortle or two from adults. (David Estrella)



Doing His Best to Confess

If you've ever thought to yourself that gorgeous men and women have an easier time finding love, read Satoru's *Doing His Best to Confess*. It'll change your world view quicker than you can say "Natsuaki." As it turns out, love is just as fickle for beautiful, seemingly perfect individuals as it is for "normal" people.

Natsuaki is tall, blonde, and gorgeous. Every girl at school wants to know what's on his mind at all times. It's usually something silly, like the thought of a house having a face. But that doesn't keep him from being the talk of the school. However, Natsuaki doesn't have eyes for anyone but a student named Nashida. He loves her carefree nature, her uneven bangs, and even the way she gets things stuck in her teeth. He just doesn't know how to confess his love for her.

Natsuaki makes plans and saves advice columns on his phone, but he's helpless when it comes to the one girl he cares about. Luckily, he has his friend Mashima to help him figure things out. He's going to show his crush how he feels about her if it's the last thing he does. And it just might be, because he's absolutely awful at moving beyond awkward interactions and spacey looks. Nashida makes him smile, but she also flusters him in the most adorable way.

For once, instead of a plain girl pining after the most beautiful guy in school, we see the story play out from the opposite perspective. The contrast between Natsuaki's stoic personality and Nashida's happy-go-lucky klutziness is a fun juxtaposition that makes the story something different from the familiar romantic slog where the two leads chase after each other from chapter to chapter. We don't often get to see a male lead at a loss



for words because his female crush has no idea how he feels about her.

The first volume does a great job of setting things up in a way that doesn't feel too rote, when Natsuaki's cluelessness could begin to grate on the nerves. By the time it's over, the reader is ready to watch the two blossom into a real couple. If this kind of momentum persists, this could be an exciting story about two very different people. With its simple but elegant artwork, snappy dialogue, and earnest humor, *Doing His Best to Confess* is an offbeat shojo tale that romantic comedy fans will eat up. Hopefully it continues at this clip and develops into something even better. (Brittany Vincent)

You Are My Happiness

What happens when you meet someone who changes everything you thought you knew about life? *You Are My Happiness* explores that idea, taking a young man who spends his days serving cheap eats and pairing him with a magical being who sends him down an unexpected romantic path. In the right hands, this would be the setup



PUBLISHER
Dempa
STORY AND ART
Bukuro Yamada
RATING
16+

to his lack of booze, but he likes to help people and won't turn anyone away. When Sakuma, a young man with devilish wings and a tail, stops by, Yokoi's world changes forever. Sakuma asks Yokoi for a simple favor: spend some time with him. And so they do—but it quickly gets a lot spicier than Yokoi expected.

Yokoi has performed "favors" for women before, but he can't get Sakuma out of his mind. They spend more and more time together, going

for a steamy dream of a story. Instead, it feels like a frustrating nightmare.

Yokoi is an overly agreeable college student who runs a food stall. He sells plenty of hearty dishes: tandoori chicken, chorizo and basil-cheese hot dogs, and baked potatoes. It's the kind of food that goes well with a beer, but unfortunately, he doesn't have a liquor license. Yokoi is forever losing customers due

a little further each time. Yokoi begins to neglect his duties to sate Sakuma's raunchy appetite, and it isn't long before all he's doing is basking in the "happiness" he feels with Sakuma. The trouble is, Sakuma is a succubus, and this is all part of a very toxic relationship.

The two have a spark, but it's clear Yokoi isn't comfortable having sex all the time and his new lifestyle is hurting him. Initially a sexy BL romp, *You Are My Happiness* becomes a downer to read as Yokoi's life goes down the toilet while he neglects everything but meeting Sakuma's demands. That isn't love; that's unhealthy obsession. If you're too annoyed by the characters' bad decisions to enjoy the smut, that's a problem.

The book has other plotting issues. About halfway through, it transforms from a supernatural BL story into something more like a psychological drama, including inscrutable family issues for Yokoi and a bizarre scene with a Barbie doll. It becomes less of a fantasy-themed romp through love and sex and takes a hard turn into something else. I'm all for weird manga, but the jarring twists and tonal shifts are likely to

lose many readers. Ultimately, *You Are My Happiness* didn't give me much happiness of my own. (Brittany Vincent)



Love After World Domination

Every love story has to start somewhere, as Desumi Magahara and Fudo Aikawa are learning the hard way. Neither character has been in a relationship before, so there's the challenge of balancing their relationship with their other responsibilities. There's just one little catch: Desumi and Fudo are mortal enemies! *Love After World Domination* takes place in a *tokusatsu*-esque universe (think *Power Rangers*) where Fudo leads a team of young superheroes called the Gelato 5. Their job is to oppose the evil Gekko Organization, of which Desumi, a.k.a. the Death Queen, is one of the strongest leaders. While battling over the fate of the Earth, they're also battling to protect their budding relationship.

Romeo & Juliet adaptations are as common as rain, but *Love After World Domination* tickles the reader in all the right places. For starters, it delivers on its core premise; its influences are obvious from the get-go, with Gelato 5 clearly taking its inspiration from the popular *Super Sentai* franchise that was adapted into *Power Rangers* in the West, while the Gekko Organization closely resembles the villainous Shocker group of *Kamen Rider* lore. The central romance draws heavily from romantic entanglements in *tokusatsu* series, especially the more comedic ones.

But even if the callouts to classic costumed hero shows don't appeal to you, the main leads and their relationship are still a draw. Fudo and Desumi are both teenagers, so it's only natural that they're clumsy and awkward, especially since this is their first relationship. With all the time they spend saving and/or endangering the world, they have no idea how to handle the basics of a personal relationship. Fudo's obsession with physical training becomes the model for their first date, while Desumi is torn between her public persona and the way she wants to be seen. The leads are a great mix of relatable traits and specific character quirks, which is especially vital since the supporting cast gets little development in the first volume.

The comedic plots range from standard sitcom miscommunications to slightly more elaborate setups, but much of the comedy hinges on the fact that the Gelato and Gekko are at war with each other, so Fudo and Desumi have to "fight" whenever anyone is watching. This soon settles into a rinse-lather-repeat formula: a battle breaks out, our leads pretend to duke it out while looking for a chance to be alone, their

romance gets interrupted, and they separate until the next battle. The art is marvelously effective at both the broad physicality of the action scenes and the more subtle expressions and character humor.

Love After World Domination takes a clever, funny premise and carries it out to near perfection. My only complaint is that Volume 1 ends so soon. I'm eager to see where this goes next.

Recommended. (Michael Goldstein)



Akira Toriyama's Manga Theater

Akira Toriyama is one of the household names of the manga world, up there with Osamu Tezuka and Hirohiko Araki. Even before manga publishing in the U.S. reached the level of legitimacy it enjoys today, Toriyama was famous among American fans by the time the *Dragon Ball Z* anime reached these shores.

Although the *Dragon Ball* series is his career-defining work, Toriyama has kept himself busy with a variety of other projects, and now his one-shot comics for *Shonen Jump* magazine, ranging from the late 1970s to the 1990s, have been compiled in a hefty omnibus courtesy of Viz.

A quick sketch dated 1983 sets the tone for *Manga Theater*: Toriyama's cartoon self-portrait lamenting being unable to drive the new car he bought with his manga royalties because he's so busy drawing more manga. His commentary comics between chapters offer insight into a period in the artist's life when manga didn't seem like such a great career choice. There's something bitterly funny about a young Toriyama obsessing over finally getting published in *Jump*, only to get trashed in the reader popularity rankings. Reading the earliest piece in the book, "Wonder Island," it's easy to see why people didn't "get" Toriyama right away. The page layouts are basic, and the humor is all over the place, alternating frantically between protracted reference comedy and wacky overreactions to nonsensical punchlines. Fans might be able to see the future Toriyama buried in these amateurish pages, but they'll also cringe through some of his efforts do too much, too soon.

Most of the later stories in the volume are vastly better than the debut work, and that's the point of an anthology like this. From a historical perspective, it's important to keep an artist's early efforts preserved and accessible, even if they might be a little embarrassing to the creator and nowhere close to representative of their milestone work. Once *Manga Theater* gets to stories like "Pink" and "Dragon Boy," one begins to see Toriyama's mature artistic sensibilities take shape. As his obsession with *Ultraman* wanes, his stories focus more on feisty girls and

plucky young men who live life at their own pace. From the beginning, Toriyama has a taste for rousing adventures to exotic islands and alien planets, but over time he works out how to flesh his ideas out with inventive plotlines and likable characters with good chemistry. His artwork, especially his character design, is solid from early on, but his storytelling and gag pacing need a little refinement over time.

Manga Theater leads with its weakest material, but it's illuminating to see the work that a great manga-ka created while still developing as an artist, including ideas that laid the foundations for hits like *Dragon Ball*. This anthology demonstrates the importance of practice and improvement over time, something artists often hate to hear but must accept if they want to create anything that will provoke someone to say, "Hey, this is pretty good". While Toriyama fans will want to pick up this collection, aspiring comic artists really need to check it out to understand what it means to hone a craft. **Recommended.** (David Estrella)



One Piece Pirate Recipes

If there's one thing I've learned from shonen anime, it's that you can't be the Number One Anything on an empty stomach. Monkey D. Luffy of *One Piece* fame knows this all too well; someone with that many rivals needs a lot of energy to rise to the challenge. Fortunately, pirate chef Sanji is ready to support his captain with piping-hot meals. And

now he's sharing his secrets with the public! *One Piece Pirate Recipes*, published by Viz, is just the title to satisfy a treasure-hunter's hunger!

Sanji, in his own words, presents home cooks with over 40 appetizing dishes based on food in the original manga. There's an easily accessible recipe in here for just about every mealtime situation, whether you need a Desert-Trekking Pirate Lunchbox for on the go, some old-school Meat on the Bone to satisfy your carnivorous urges, or a taste of the briny deep with Yummy Clams. Each dish is accompanied by a "Manga Moment" highlighting its origins in *One Piece*. The only drawback to the recipes is a certain lack of variety—not so much in the selection of foods, but in the scant opportunities to get creative and add your own twists if you're feeling adventurous. Most of the recipes are very cut-and-dried.

While none of the dishes in this book will give you stretching powers (or any powers, for that matter), they're bound to satiate your inner pirate. *One Piece Pirate Recipes* is a good entry to cooking for anyone who's looked at the mouthwatering food in shonen anime and wished they could try it. (Michael Goldstein)

takt op.Destiny mixes
up classical music and
stunning animation.





WE are well and truly in the age of “girls based on things” media mix projects. Mobile games and their related anime will introduce you to a gacha pool full of storybook characters, historical heroes, warships, and racehorses given a full *bishoujo* redesign. Some of those hit; others miss. And many come ready-made with an anime adaptation.

It would be disingenuous to pretend that *takt op. Destiny* isn't tied to a mobile game in which you interact with pretty personified classical compositions before sending them into battle. Yes: the heroine of this series is “Beethoven's Symphony No.5 in C Minor Op.67” as an anime girl. But on its own, the series makes that concept work—and even turns it into meaningful observations on the role that music plays in our lives and the effect it has on us. Even to the point where you can begin to forget it's one arm of a mixed media franchise.

And for a project in which you can flirt with the physical embodiment of Ravel's “Boléro,” that's not bad.

Prelude

The full *takt op.* (pronounced “Takt opus”) project hails from Bandai Namco and DeNA. With both companies handling mobile games for major titles—including collaborating on *One Piece Setting Sail!*—the project was poised for the big time. On top of that, the anime hails from Madhouse and MAPPA, both of which have a fair share of legendary titles under their belts. The pedigree is impressive right out of the gate, if nothing else.

As for the setting, it's a familiar sort of worldbuilding for anime fans. An evil force came to Earth, posing a threat like none we've seen before. Today, those are the D2s: horrible space monsters driven to violence by music. A strict ban is put on music as a group known as Symphonica works on driving out the threat. But apparently not strict enough.

The Music of the Spheres!

By Kara Dennison



Young pianists Takt and Cosette find themselves on the losing end of a D2 attack when playing piano at a festival. Their lives should have ended ... and would have, if Cosette hadn't reawakened as a Musicart and bitten Takt's arm off.

The Musicarts

So what exactly is a Musicart? Simply put, a weapon. A little less simply put, they are humanoid weapons who embody a classical composition, steered by their bond with a Conductor. Only they can truly destroy a D2. Beyond that, Symphonica isn't very forthcoming in what they are or how they're created. But it's implied (actually, outright *said*) that these young women "give up their humanity" to take on these magical musical powers.

One thing we do know early on, though, is that Takt and Destiny's bond is uncommon. Destiny transforms like a magical girl; most Musicarts are always in "armored" form. Also, she seems to feed on Takt's life energy—possibly why his right arm vanishes again when

ever she transforms. The solution? A road trip with Cosette's adoptive sister Anna to New York, where hopefully the local Symphonica branch can do something.

Revisiting the Classics

There's no shortage of classical music rep in anime: *Princess Tutu* and *ClassicaLoid* weave it into their story structure, and series like *Evangelion* wrap notable compositions up in their soundtracks all the time. But *takt op. Destiny* does something we don't see very often: it treats classical music—and music in general—more like a living being. Appropriately enough.

There's little differentiation between classical music and other eras throughout the series. The Duke Ellington Orchestra's "Take the A Train" is the performance of choice for a pivotal early scene, and you'll also get to hear Takt play Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." Because it's not just classical music he misses. It's music in general. And he's so addicted to it, and misses it so much, that he'd risk death just to hear one old tune on a jukebox.

The Musicarts themselves hit the right notes (as it were), too. The cheerful young Titan, like the Mahler symphony for which she's named, is equal measures childishness and heroics with a dark underpinning. And Destiny, modeled after the most famous symphony ever written, is wild and powerful and takes on unexpected forms.

One of the most interesting parts of the show, though, is not from its musical or magical participants.

Silent Partner

Along for the ride is the aforementioned Anna, longtime friend of Takt and adoptive sister of the girl who would become Destiny. She has no magic powers of her own, and her only dog in this fight is the involvement of people she cares about. But it's a pretty big dog.

Anna is that one character you get in just about any anime where magic and fighting happen: the civilian. She's involved, she has skills, and at the moment she's Takt and Destiny's ride to New York. But in quiet moments, as others casually discuss life and death and paranormal occurrences that threaten her loved ones, we see her attempting to bear up. And sometimes failing.

It's a reminder every week that our heroes are a rare occurrence, who most of the world—even the world of this anime—would love nothing more than normality and security. And it's a



SUPERCELL

If you're a Vocaloid fan, you might be familiar with Supercell. The group, which got their start making Hatsune Miku tunes and took off with the popularity of "Black Rock Shooter," composed the opening for the series. Simply called "Takt," the group composed and performed the theme with fellow artists Mafumafu and Gaku.



© DeNA/takt op.Phil.



Road to Berlin

For now, Takt only has one Musicart to contend with. But in the mobile game, he'll be responsible for the entire squad. The game finds him awakening at Berlin Symphonica headquarters, taking on the massive task of conducting multiple Musicarts. Destiny is still there, of course; but so is everyone from "Car-men" to "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star."

reminder that, for some people, the idea of "saving the world" is much smaller and closer to home. It's less about heroics and more about finding a way to restore what they knew.

In *takt op.Destiny*, the project tells a much more personal story in advance of the mobile game. How closely tied the Takt and Destiny of the anime are to their game counterparts remains to be seen. But the series, at least, lets us see Music as a character: powerful, compelling, dangerous, and worth the risk.

takt op.Destiny is available from Crunchyroll.

takt op.Destiny offers meaningful observations on the role that music plays in our lives and the effect it has on us.

Even to the point where you can begin to forget it's one arm of a mixed-franchise.



OTAKUUSA

MANGA PREVIEWS

We bet you know how this works already, but for those of you in the cheap seats, our manga section is printed in the correct Japanese format, to be read from right to left. Begin on the upper right of each two-page spread, reading each panel right-to-left, from the right page to the left. Click the arrow on the right side to advance to the following pages.



WANDANCE

PAGE 39

Story and Art by Coffee

A boy named Kaboku sees a girl named Wanda dance, and suddenly burns with a need to join in. With its thrilling scenes of Japanese hip-hop dance and quirky, charming characters, this is a new, inspirational manga for fans of coming-of-age stories like Blue Period and Your Lie in April. Get up and join the Wandance!

Kaboku has always just gone with the flow, marching in step to the drumbeat of the expectations of those around him: parents, school, plans for the future. It feels predictable, safe, and... empty. But one night, Kaboku's at school late, and he happens on a girl alone, moving wildly, turning a blank space of concrete into a canvas. This is Hikari Wanda, a member of the hip-hop dance club. Kaboku is immediately smitten, but the road to stepping out of his shell is a long one. The club is almost entirely girls, and they're all, well, way better than him. What's ahead is unknown, and that's terrifying, but it also means, for the first time in Kaboku's life... a taste of freedom.

Available now!



ISLAND IN A PUDDLE

PAGE 61

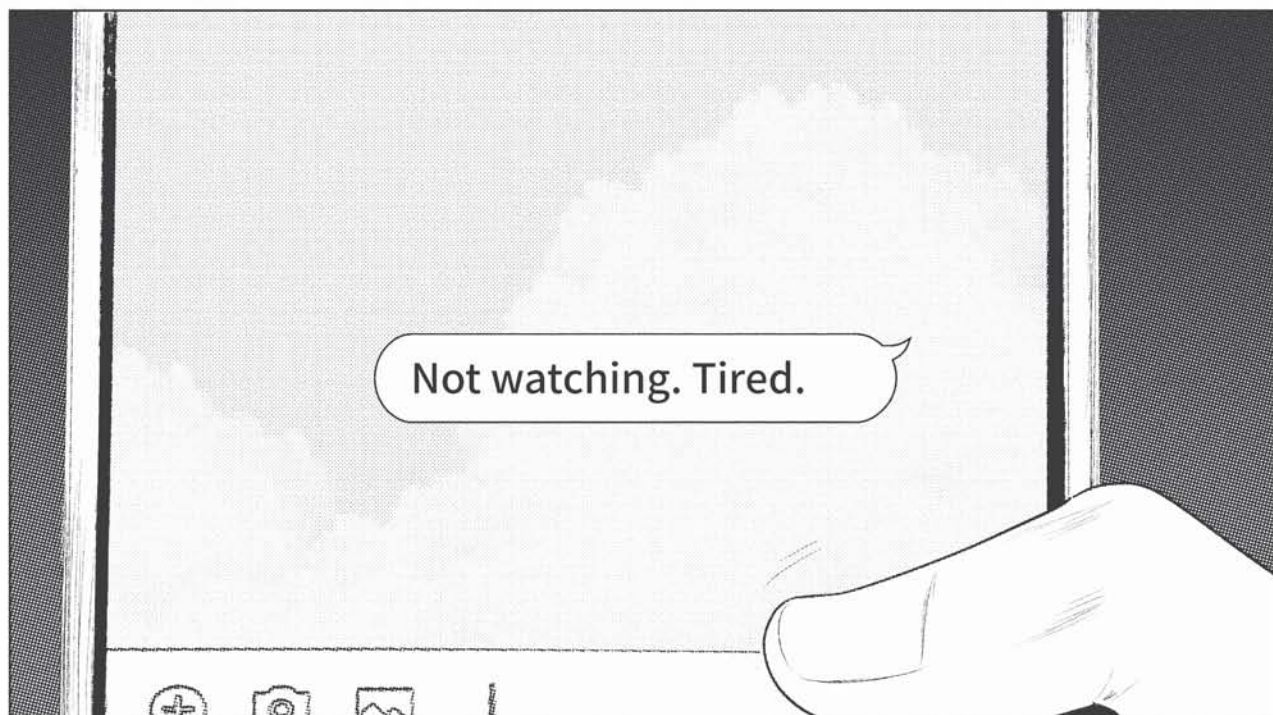
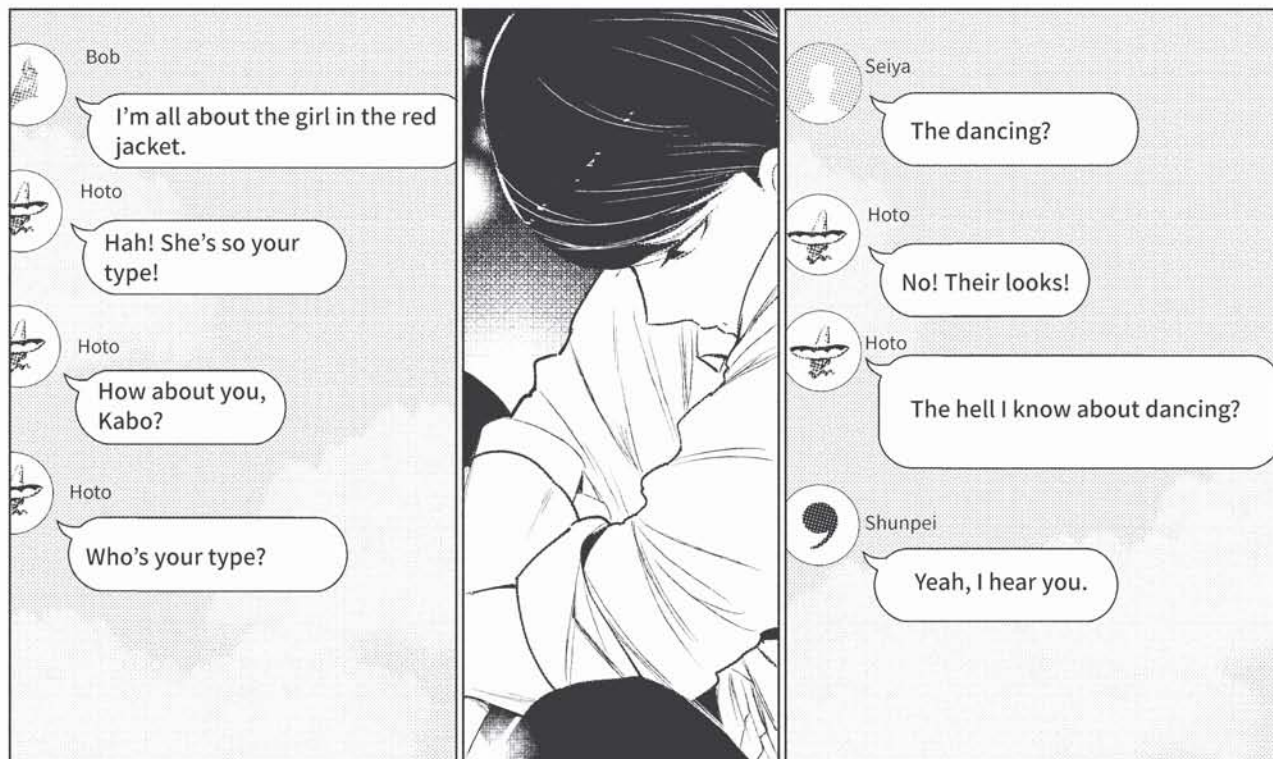
Story and Art by Kei Sanbe

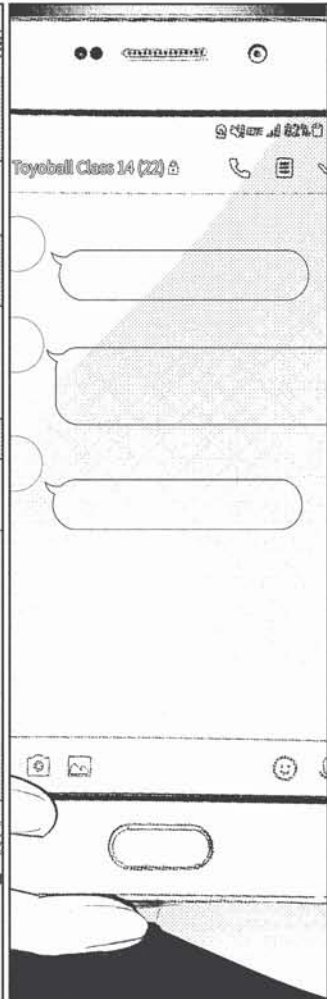
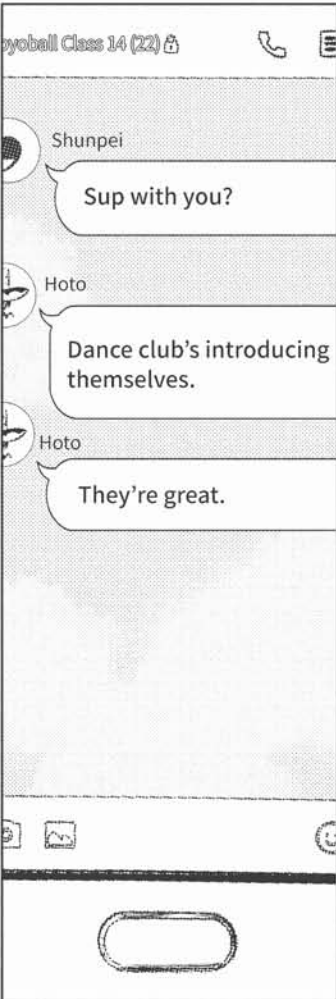
The new manga series from Kei Sanbe, the master of suspense behind Erased, plunges an innocent young boy into Tokyo's criminal underworld, as he fights to keep his younger sister alive, and to return his soul to his own body!

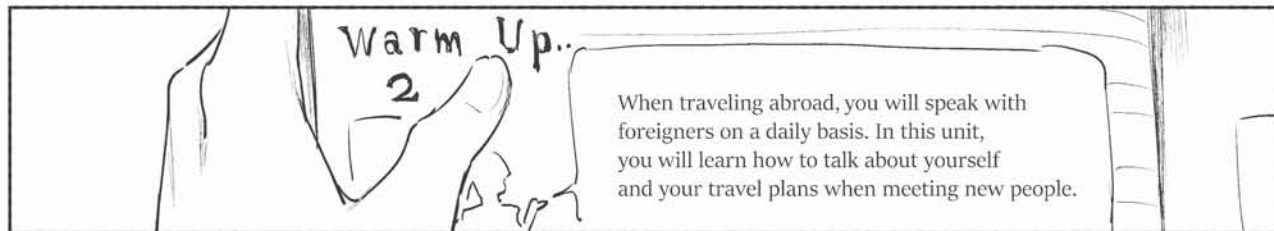
The tiny apartment where Minato lives may as well be an isolated island in the middle of the ocean. Despite still being in elementary school, it falls on his shoulders to care for his little sister Nagisa, who never stops asking when their mother will make one of her infrequent visits home. On one of those visits, their mother takes them to an amusement park, only to give Minato some cash and leave them on a Ferris wheel... but as the wheel reaches the top, lightning strikes, and, instead of his sister, Minato sees the corpse of a woman... and, reflected in the glass looking back at him, an unfamiliar and menacing face!

Available March 2022!



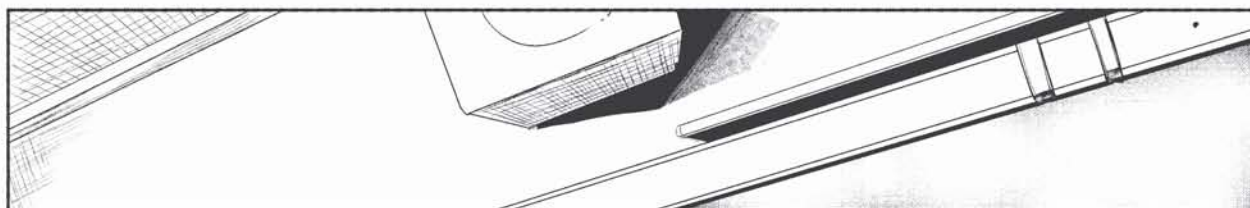
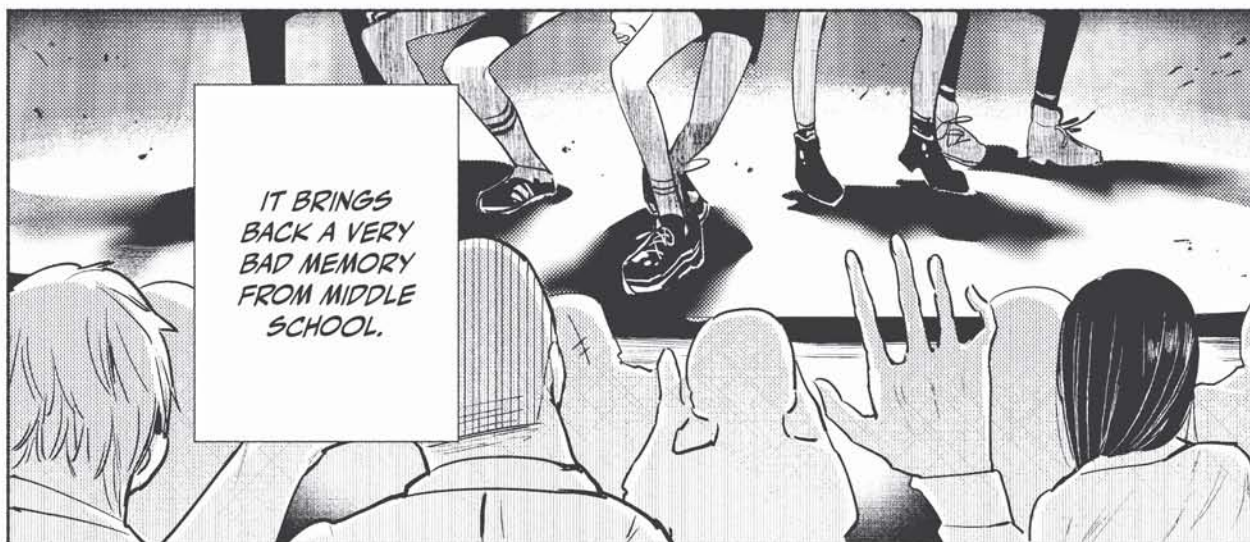






When traveling abroad, you will speak with foreigners on a daily basis. In this unit, you will learn how to talk about yourself and your travel plans when meeting new people.







NOTHING
GOOD COMES OF
ANYTHING ELSE.

I JUST WANT
TO BE NORMAL.

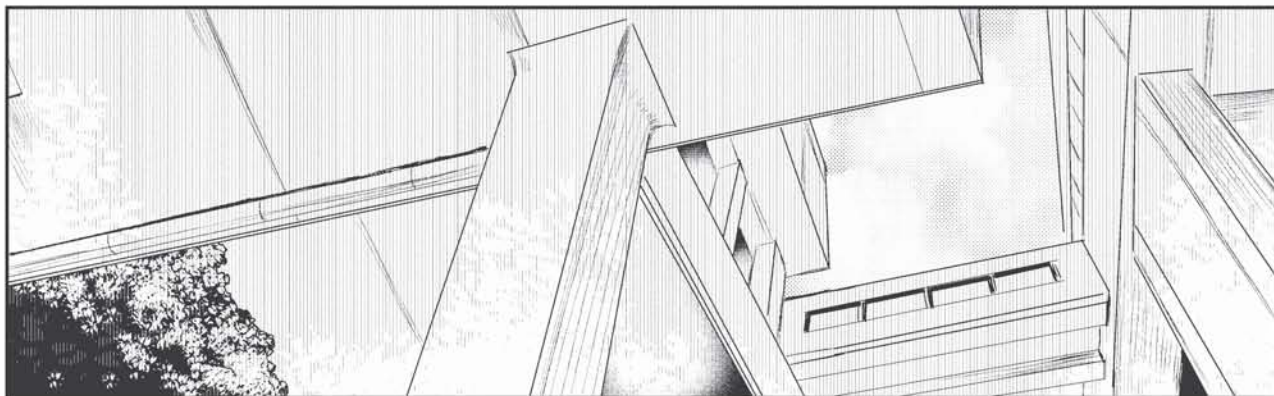
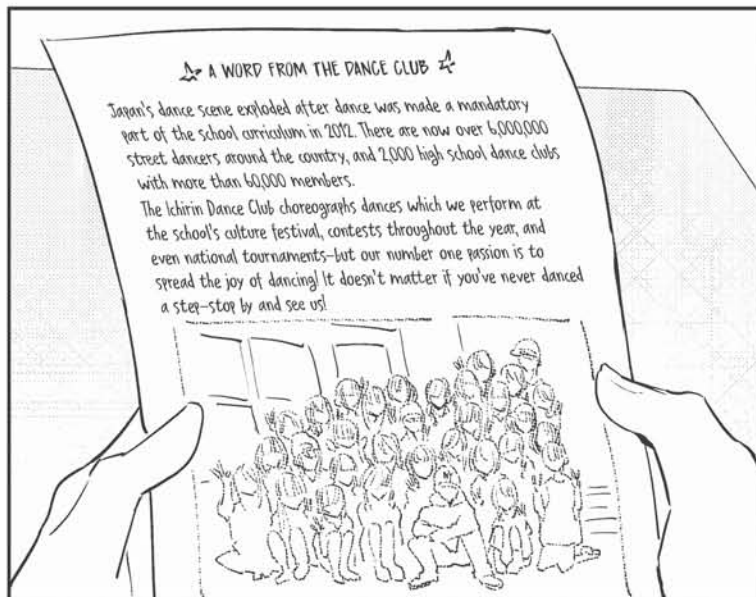
I DON'T WANT
TO STAND OUT.
I DON'T WANT
TO GO AGAINST
THE GRAIN.













Kodansha - WANDANCE

Wandance ©Coffee/Kodansha, Ltd.



SO HOW
DID I...?

WAIT...

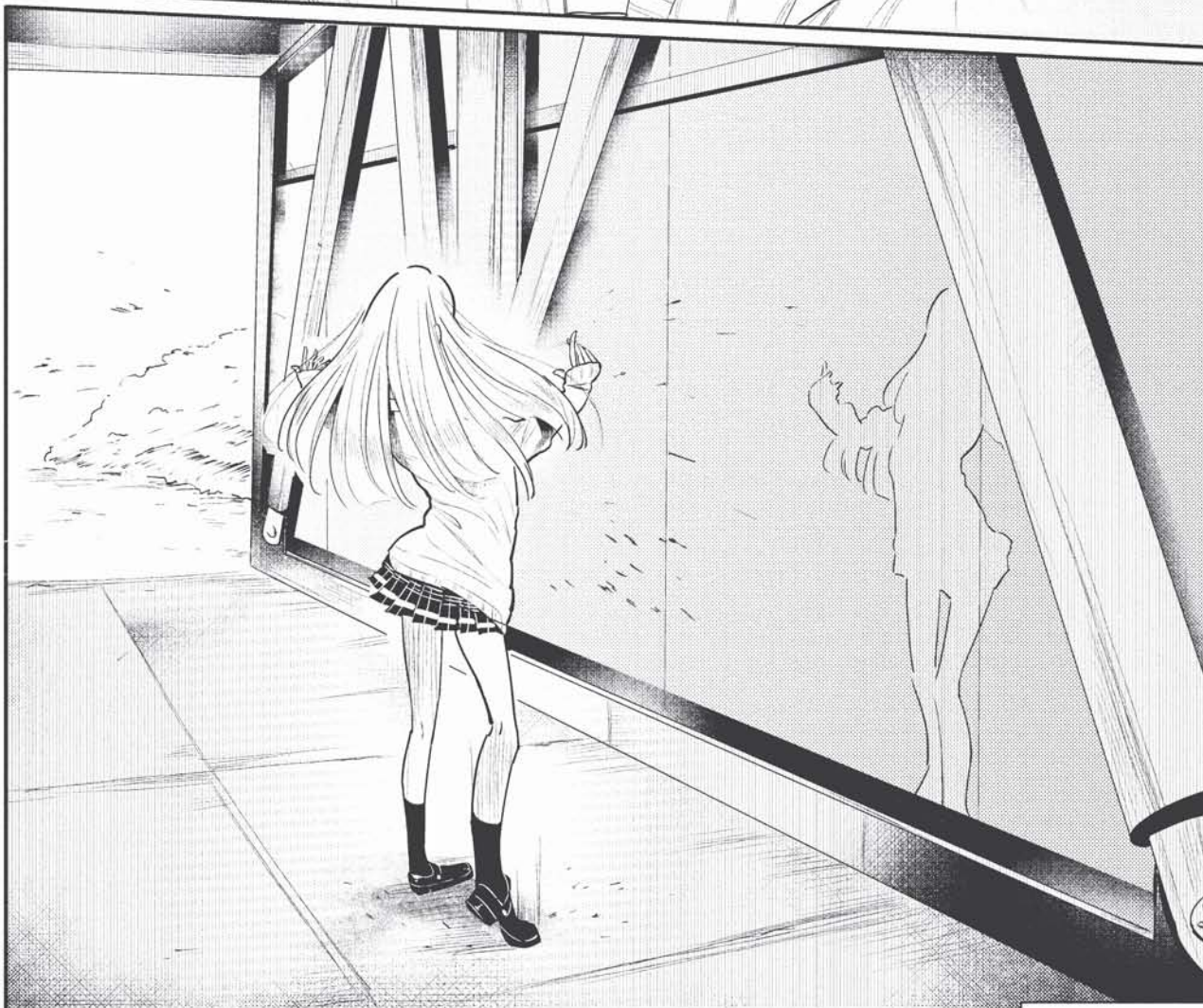


I MEAN,
SHE'S
REALLY
GOOD.
I THINK...

Not like
I'd know.

SHE'S
REALLY
CUTE...

NO,
NO!



BUT WHY IS
SHE DANCING
THERE? AND BY
HERSELF?

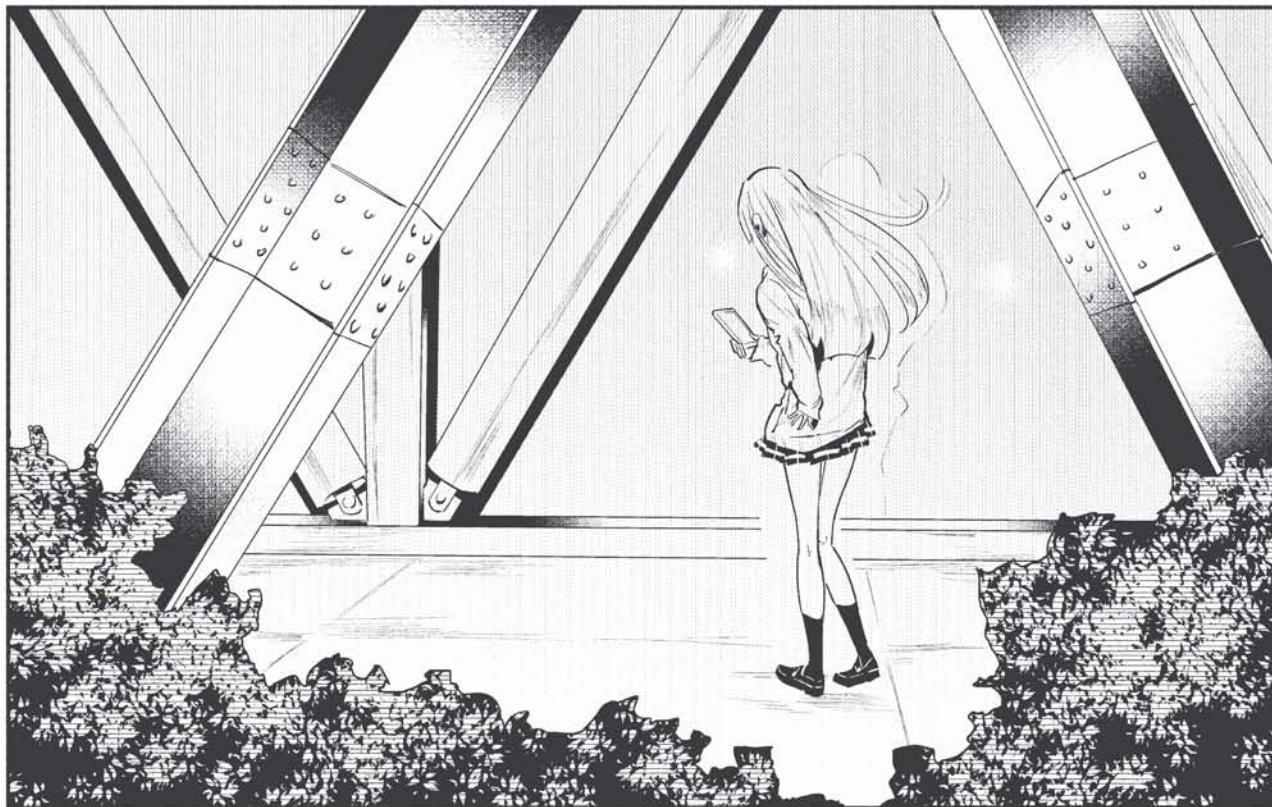
And in her

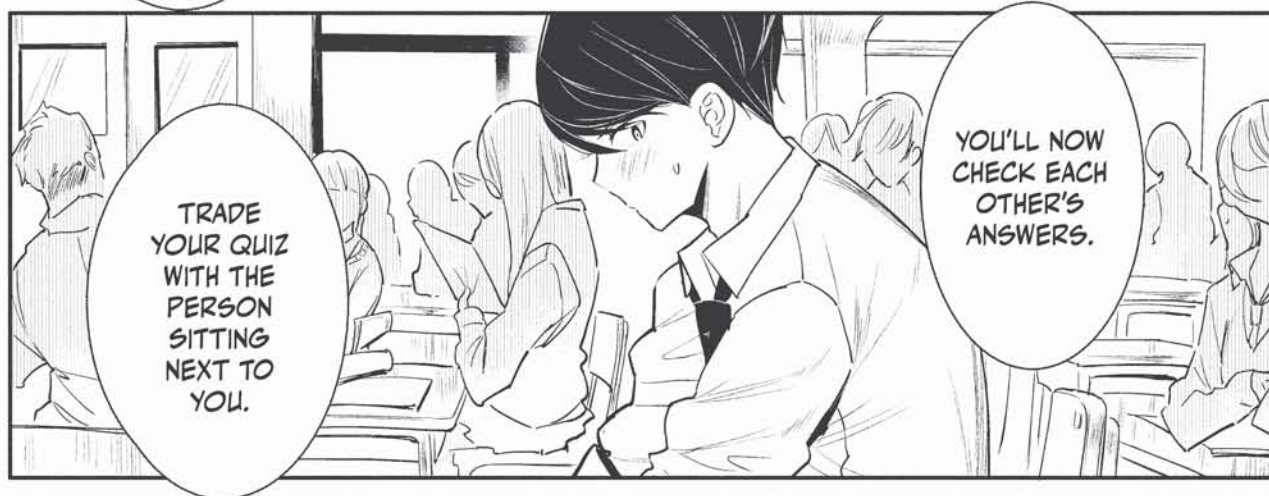
WAIT, SO
SHE'S A
DANCER?

IT'S HER!

SHE'S...
DANCING...







Read the rest in *Wandance*, available June 2022!

Kodansha - ISLAND IN A PUDDLE

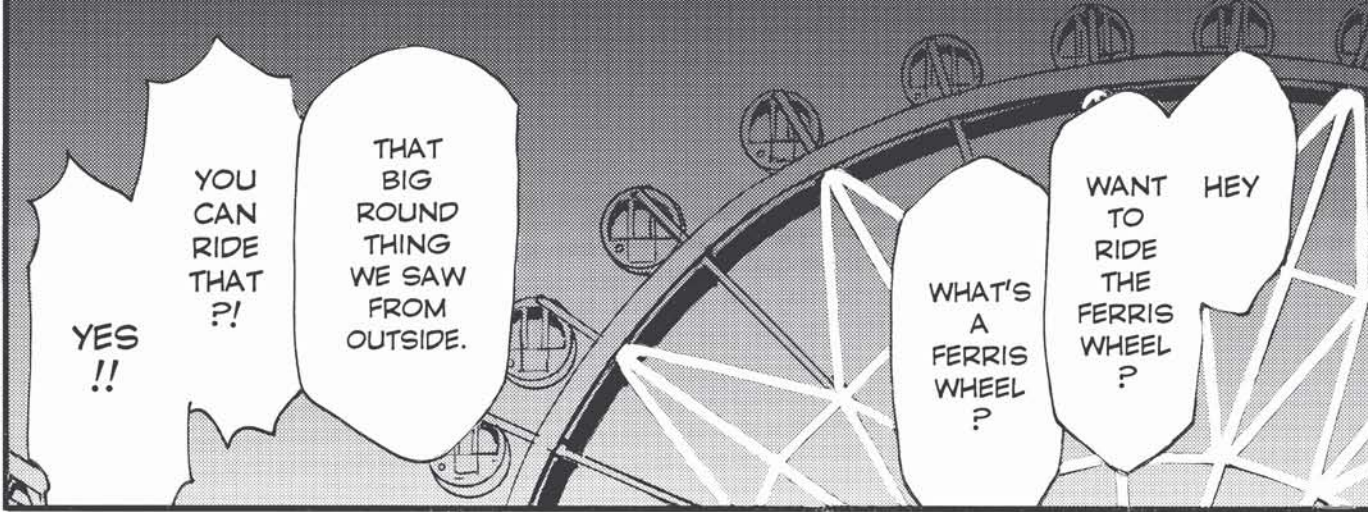
Island in a Puddle ©Kei Sanbe/Kodansha, Ltd.



Kodansha - ISLAND IN A PUDDLE

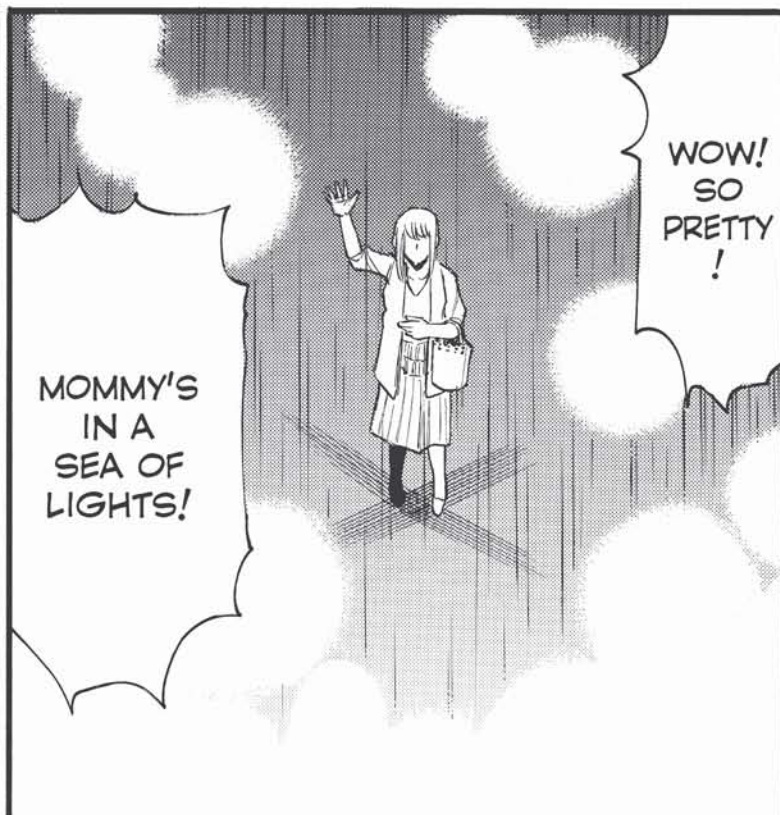
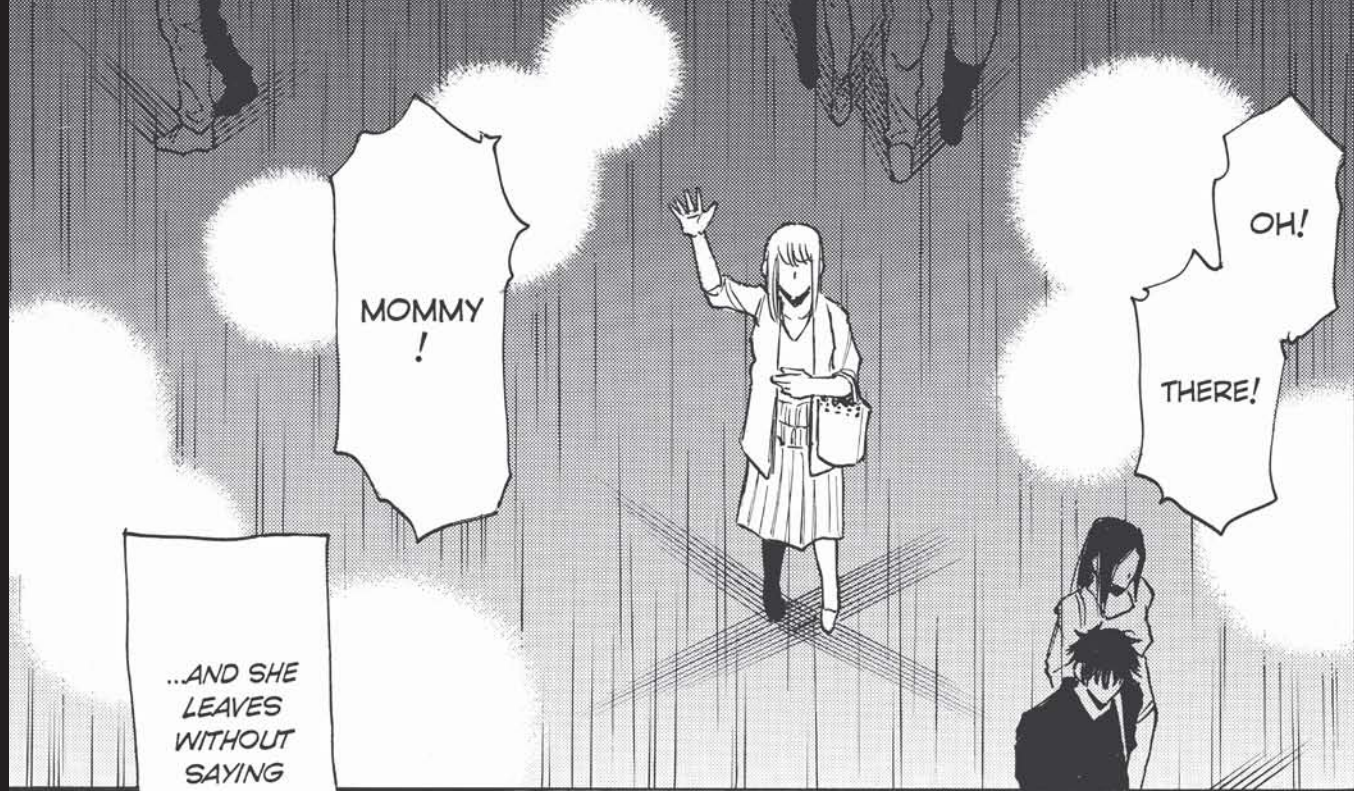
Island in a Puddle ©Kei Sanbe/Kodansha, Ltd.





Kodansha - ISLAND IN A PUDDLE

Island in a Puddle ©Kei Sanbe/Kodansha, Ltd.



...IT'S
STARTING
TO RAIN...



...YEAH.

WHEN
MOM
OFFERS
ME
MONEY...

MINATO
!
LOOK
HOW
HIGH
WE'RE
GOING!



WOW!

IT
GOES
ALL THE
WAY UP
THERE?



SHE
ALWAYS
GIVES ME
ALL THE
BILLS
IN HER
WALLET...

IS
SHE
ON
THIS
SIDE
?

HUH
?

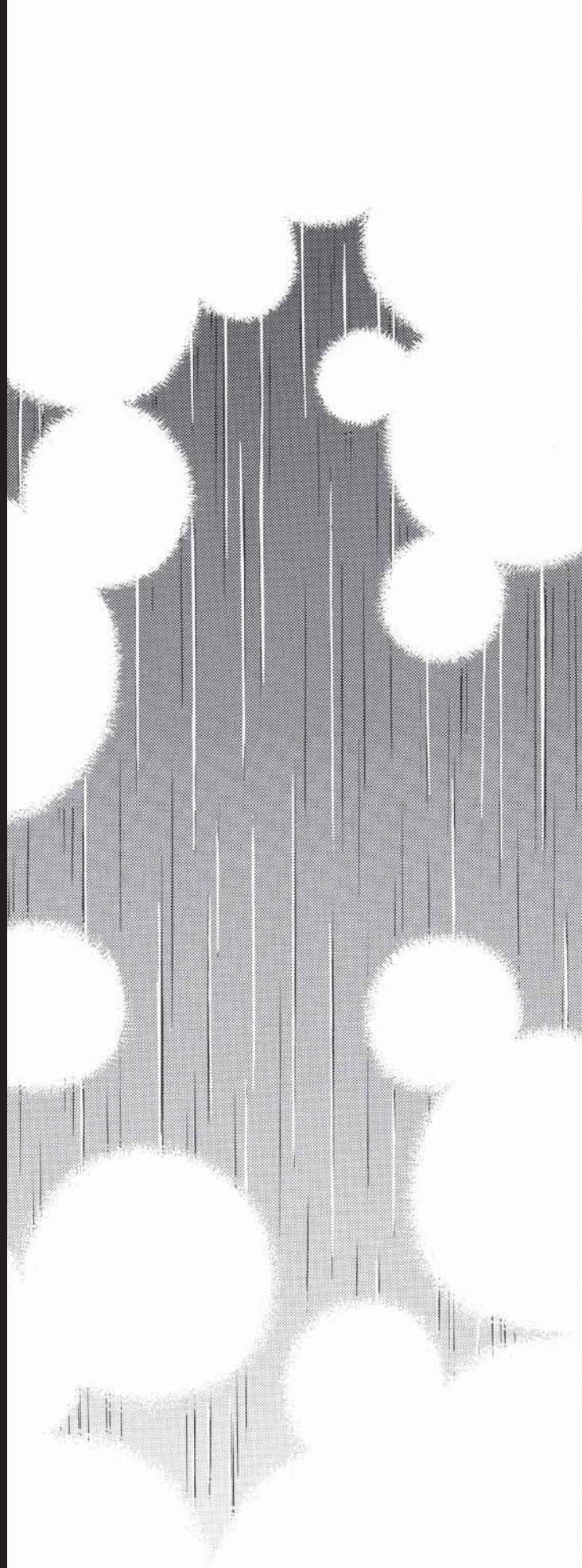
WHERE'S
MOMMY
?

...IT
ALWAYS
MEANS
SHE'S
ABOUT
TO
LEAVE.



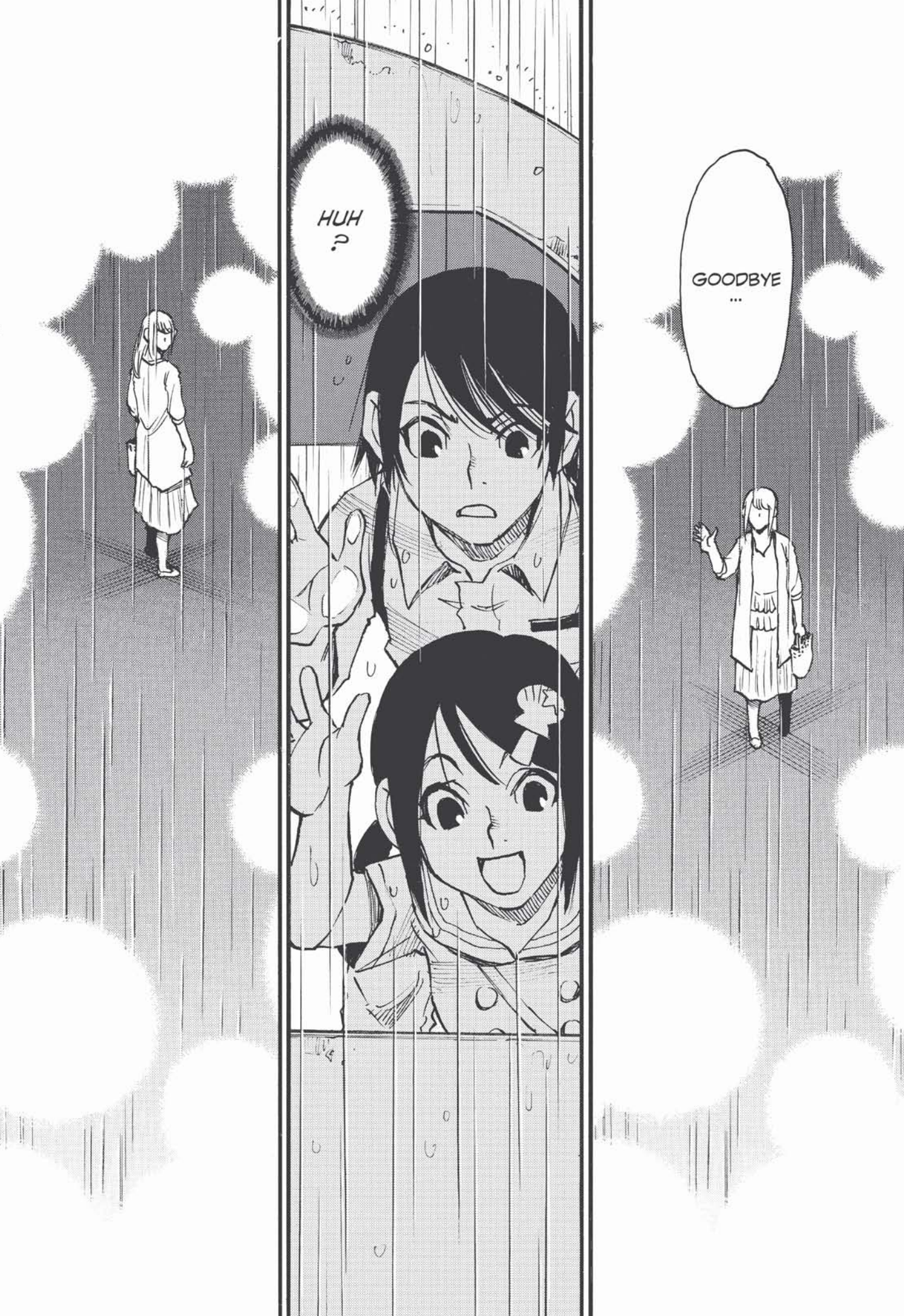
Kodansha - ISLAND IN A PUDDLE

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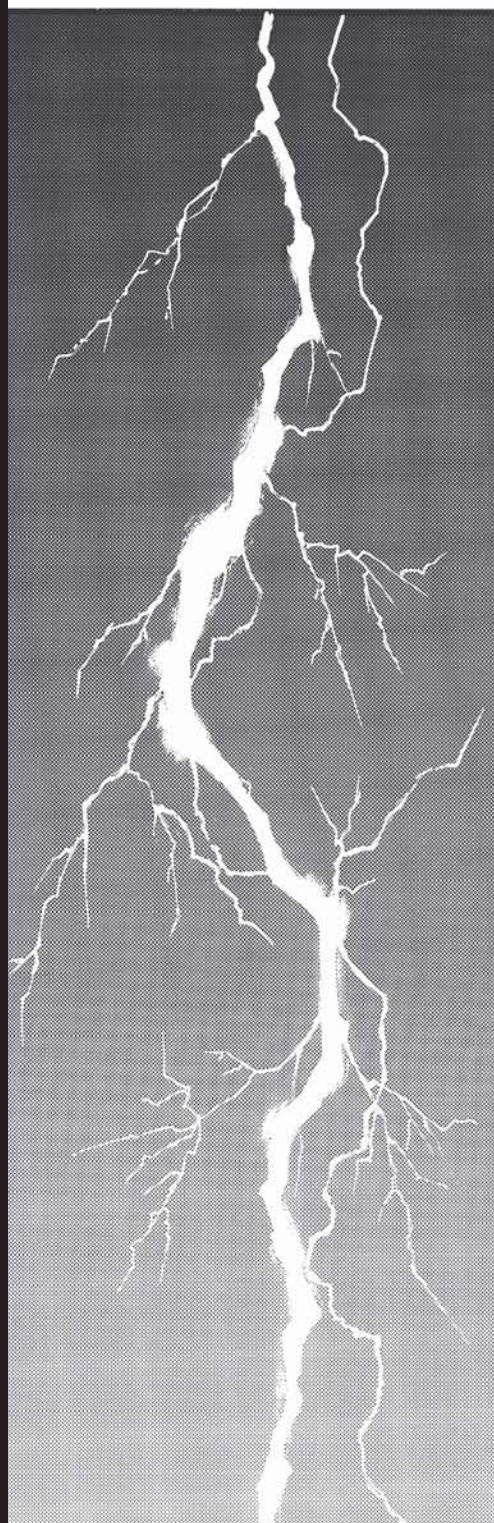
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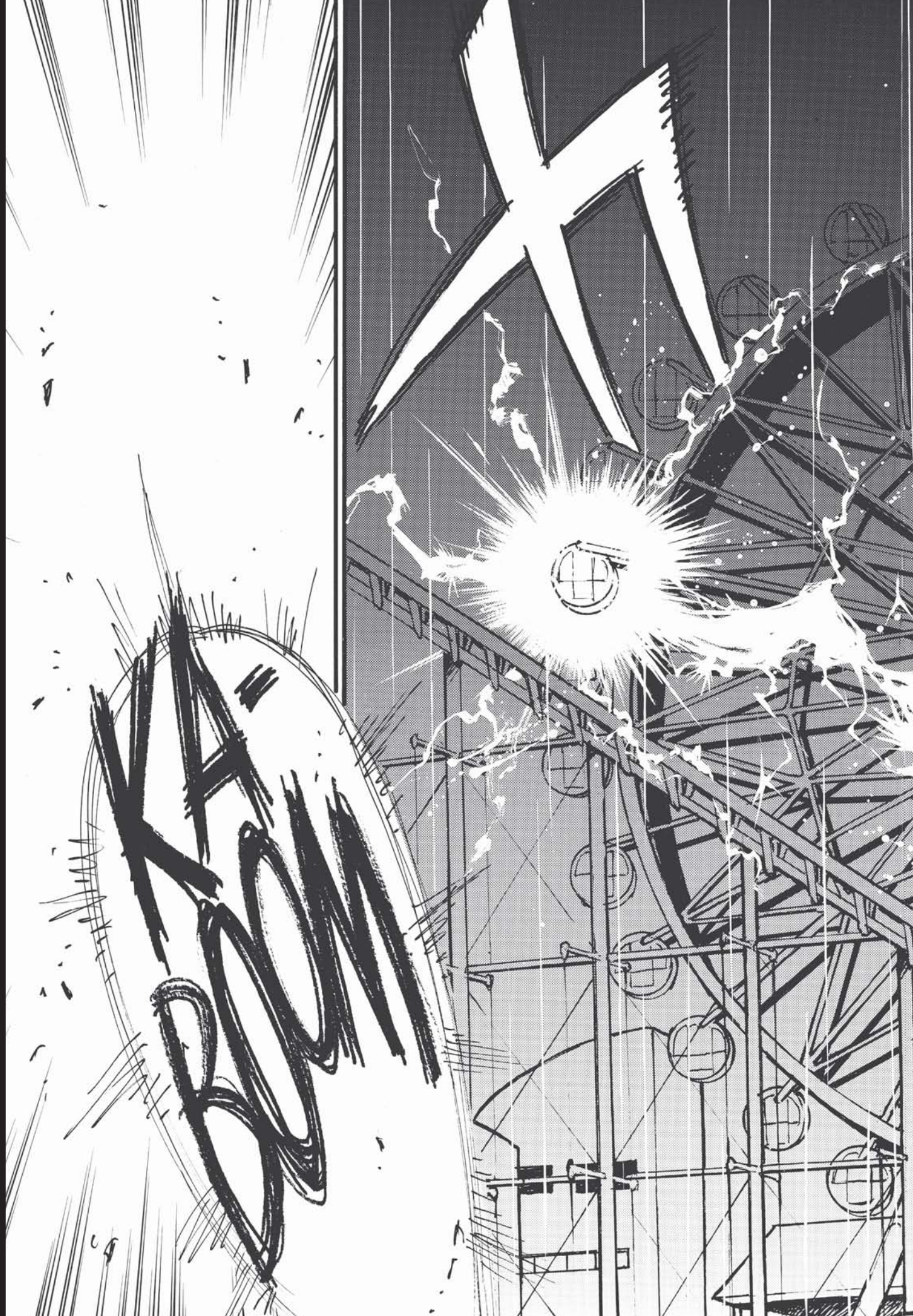
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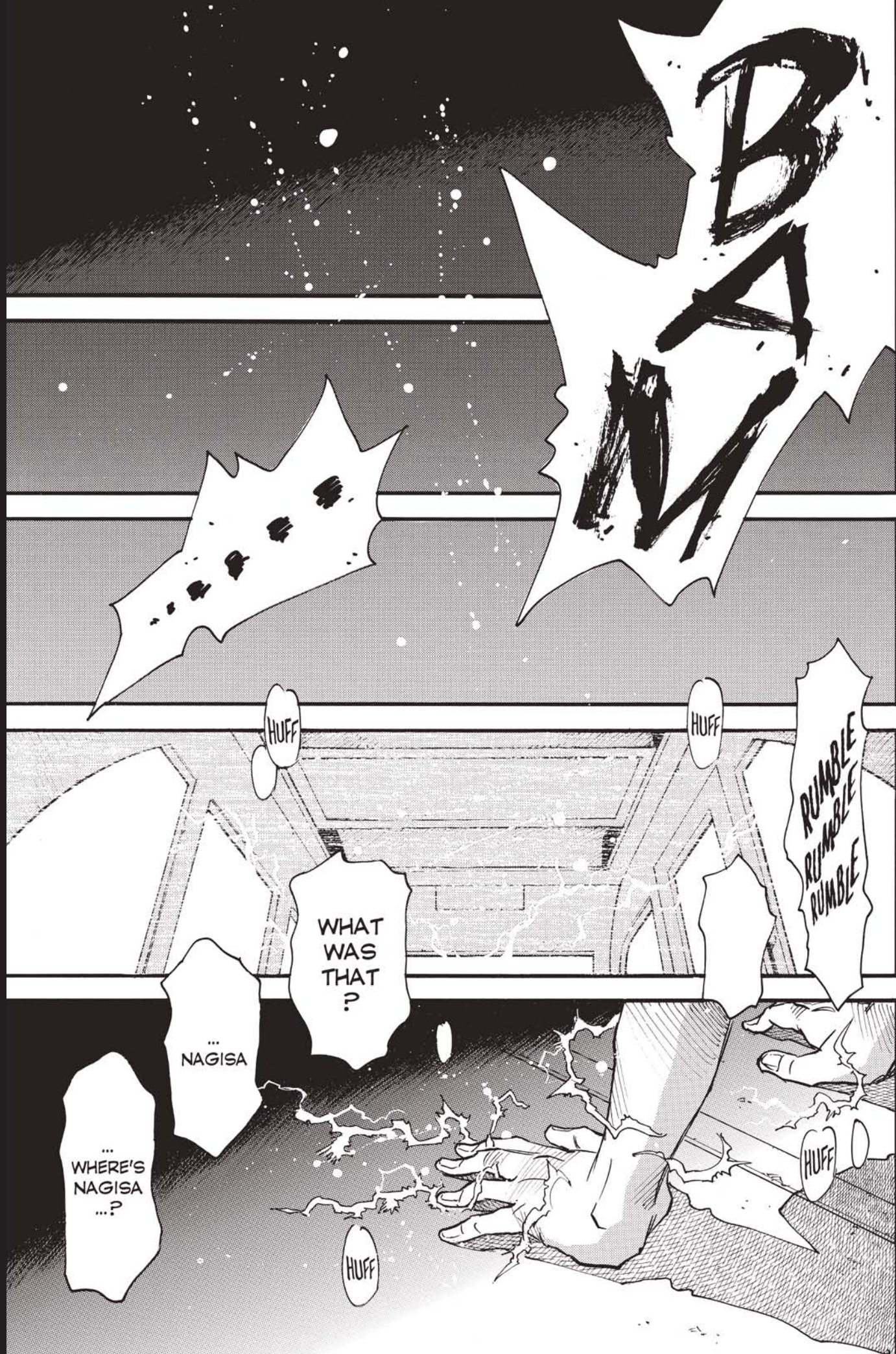
Kodansha - ISLAND IN A PUDDLE

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Read the rest in *Island in a Puddle* available March 2022!

Go to www.webotakuusa.com to enter now!

Hey, everyone likes to get something free, right?

Some of our advertisers sent us samples of their cool stuff to give away to lucky OTAKU USA readers! But guess what? There's not enough for everyone. So, we're going to draw names out of a hat, and send the goodies to a few lucky otaku!

HERE'S HOW TO ENTER: Just go to www.otakuusamagazine.com, click on "giveaway," and type your name, address and phone number and/or e-mail address and click on "submit." Or, if snail mail's your preference, write your name, address, phone number and/or email address on a postcard or sheet of paper and mail it to: OTAKU Giveaway (April 2022), 2406 Reach Road, Williamsport, PA 17701. If your name is chosen, we'll contact you, or just send you the item!

Rules, Rules, Rules. The official rules are on page 101.

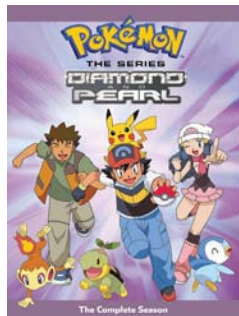
Viz Media

Pokémon The Series: Diamond and Pearl Complete Collection (1 winner)

If Gary Oak is headed for the Sinnoh region, then Ash Ketchum won't be far behind! Ready to take on the Sinnoh League, Ash brings along Pikachu and meets up with Brock in Sinnoh, where the pair of Trainers are soon joined by a third—Dawn, a novice Pokémon Coordinator

determined to follow in the footsteps of her mother. Both Ash and Dawn struggle with their respective paths, but it's easy for them to make new friends, gaining new Pokémon like Turtwig and Piplup.

This Complete Collection includes 51 episodes on 7 DVDs.



Seis Manos, Season 1 (2 winners)

Orphans raised by a martial arts master are plunged into a mystery involving demonic powers, drug cartels, ancient rituals and blood sacrifice.



2-Disc Blu-ray Set, 8 Episodes, 16X9 HD 1080P, 5.1 Audio in English and Spanish, with English and Spanish Subtitles

SPECIAL FEATURES: An Interview with Director

Willis Bulliner, The Music of Seis Manos: Composing the Opening Theme with Carl Thiel, An Interview with the Creators of Seis Manos, An Interview with Fight Choreographer Thomas Leverett

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Diamond is Unbreakable: Chapter 1 (Live-Action Movie) (1 winner)
Welcome to idyllic Morioh, whose ocean views

and charming townscapes make it a breezy Japanese utopia. But a chain of grisly killings has cast a bloody pall of uncertainty over its residents, especially Josuke Higashikata, a

high schooler with offbeat hair and even more eccentric abilities. Now, with his grandfather on Morioh's homicide list, Josuke must resort to his surreal "Stand" powers if he ever hopes to heal his beloved family and town. Josuke may have a Stand-wielding relative at his side, but the killer has plenty of help too.

This set includes both DVD and Blu-ray in 1080p HD, 16x9 aspect ratio with English subtitles.

Special Features: Stand CGI Feature, Art Gallery, Japanese Movie Premiere.



Bandai Spirits Co., Ltd

Figuarts mini Ram (1 winner)

Your favorite characters, stylized and squashed into a fun to collect palm size! Featuring lifelike eyes and simple posability, Figuarts mini is a spin-off of the TAMASHII NATIONS Figuarts brand. Now Roswaal's maid RAM, twin sister of Rem from "Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World," joins the popular series!

Set Contents: Main body, Optional arms, Custom stand

Release: January 2022



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Set Contents: Main body, Optional arms, Custom stand

Release: January 2022







By Daryl Surat

Anime's most infamous
master criminal returns in
Lupin the Third Part Six!

TO A THIEF! TO CATCH!



The 21st century renaissance of anime's greatest thief continues unabated. *Lupin the Third* celebrates his fifty-year anniversary as an anime character (as they officially count it) in 2021, and a new television series comes our way hot off the heels of a plethora of other adventures. Of the seven *Lupin the Third* television series made throughout its half-century existence, four have come within the last ten years alone. That's not even taking into consideration the multiple films within the same timeframe! I often compare the animated adventures of the Lupin Gang to those of Batman: there's enough variation in tone that you're bound to find at least one approach you enjoy, and you're under no real obligation to watch all of it or follow any viewing order.

Lupin the Third: Part Six does mark a changing of the guard, in that not only is it the first *Lupin* television series made since the passing of the original creator Kazuhiko Kato aka Monkey Punch in 2019, it's the first to not feature the voice of Kiyoshi Kobayashi, the final remaining member of the original *Lupin* voice cast, having voiced sharpshooter Daisuke Jigen ever since the 1969 12-minute pilot film which isn't actually counted for the fifty-years marker. (They're counting it from the start of the first TV series in 1971.) A special Jigen-centric Episode 0 serves as Kobayashi's farewell to the character he embodied for 52 years, as Jigen has one-on-one conversations with every recurring member of the show before shooting up a storm and riding off into the sunset; from episode 1 of *Part Six* onwards, Jigen is voiced by veteran Akio Otsuka, whose father Chikao Otsuka was the 1971 TV voice actor for Goemon (and Zenigata in the aforementioned pilot film).

It seems the last decade's worth of *Lupin* TV series have focused on the gang wreaking havoc in one primary country. For Part IV it was *The Italian Adventure*; Part V was *Misadventures in France*. *Lupin the Third Part Six* focuses on England. In a similar fashion to the preceding series, this latest set of capers features both stand-alone episodes written by notable guest contributors as well as continuing story arcs

Despite being perennially associated with the 1960s and 1970s, *LUPIN* has proven it's possible not only to remain relevant in the 21st century, but be more popular than ever before without coasting on nostalgia.




which now are identified by name in the episode title so you know which episodes are which. The initial arc involves Lupin III vs. Holmes in a battle between generational descendants of literary figures that are in the public domain, since the grandson of Maurice Leblanc's gentleman thief Arsene Lupin must match wits with the man who has inherited the name and position of the world's greatest consulting detective: Sherlock Holmes of 221B Baker Street! Yes, the rivalry which first began unofficially in 1908 (using a copyright dodging alias Herlock Sholmes; you didn't think *Ace Attorney* came up with that one, did you?) carries on with their descendants in 2021. For you Baker Street Irregulars out there, this take on Holmes is surprisingly faithful to the books in places, but underneath his surface-level malaise may reside a more vengeful Holmes than commonly seen. It seems that Dr. John Watson is no longer alive—leaving Holmes to raise Lily, Watson's daughter who appears to be created for this anime—and Lupin was the one responsible! There is promise of interactions between the supporting cast, so I'm hoping for some good buddy hijinks between Inspectors Zenigata and Lestrade, and perhaps Fujiko and Mrs. Hudson.

Of course, that's not the only literary generational descendant to keep eyes on, as Lupin still has unfinished business with Albert d'Arèsy, his former partner turned rival from *Part V* who returns to the cast; yet another break from tradition, since usually the only recurring characters are Lupin, Jigen, Goemon the swordsman, femme fatale Fujiko, and hapless Inspector Zenigata. Come to think of it, we never did find out whether Lupin and Albert were actually related after all, huh? Future arcs promise a more international focus and the intriguing possibility of having even more return appearances of several of what I call the Lupin girls: the one-off female leads of the various *Lupin the Third* tales over the years that were never heard from again (until now, perhaps!). At least, they certainly RESEMBLE them; time will tell.

If a recurring theme of many *Lupin the Third Part V* episodes pertained to the Lupin Gang's interplay with modern technology, then it seems classic literature is what underplays *Part Six*. The works of Maurice Leblanc and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are obvious, but the first guest episode features Lupin, Jigen, Goemon, Fujiko, and Zenigata crossing paths with Ellery



© Monkey Punch / TMS • NTV



From a writing,
character
interaction, and
storyboarding
standpoint
Lupin the
Third Part Six
is a worthy
addition to
the series.



Mamoru Oshii's LUPIN, Finally ...

The second guest episode of *Lupin the Third Part Six* Episode 4 was easily my single most anticipated of all ever, since it was announced it would be written by Mamoru Oshii of *Ghost in the Shell* fame. You see, Oshii was originally going to direct the third *Lupin the Third* film, but his proposed idea (in conjunction with Hideaki Anno, Yoshitaka Amano, Koji Morimoto, and others) was deemed too unconventional and the project scrapped. Don't worry, their ideas involving things like angels, the Tower of Babel, and so on got refined and turned into other now-famous anime works instead! Oshii's tale is an extended homage to Ernest Hemingway by way of Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (or perhaps it's like *Suda51*?), as the episode knowingly recreates the plot as well as much of the dialogue to Hemingway's short story "The Killers" while name-dropping the other short stories in Hemingway's *Men Without Women*. Several assassins converge within a small restaurant, each awaiting the arrival of the same target, and each killer is a clear homage to a famous fictional hired assassin. My favorite detail is that one of the killers is Juzo Togo, a blatant palette swap of Golgo 13 who often uses Duke Togo for an alias. Oshii aficionados will be reminded of his Black Trinary OVA episode of *Mobile Police Patlabor*, in which one of the bomber suspects is also remarkably similar to Golgo 13. Perhaps now that we've finally seen Oshii's *Lupin*, we can get Oshii's *Golgo 13*?



Queen as they solve a murder mystery. The second is a meta-textual adaptation of an Ernest Hemingway short story (see sidebar), and episodes 5 and 6 are both callbacks to novels by Edogawa Rampo featuring his famous private detective, Kogoro Akechi.

From a writing, character interaction, and storyboarding standpoint *Lupin the Third Part Six* is a worthy addition. And yet, the combined toll of COVID-19, poor working conditions of animators, industry-spanning talent drain, and general lack of time/resources due to there simply being too much anime being made every season is on subtle display throughout the production. For while *Lupin* as an animation institution has the reputation of being a showcase for top-level key animation, the animation in *Part Six* is merely very good. For example, vehicles are now rendered in 3D CG, and while 2019's theatrical *Lupin III: The First* demonstrated that 3D CG could admirably depict classic *Lupin*-style action choreography, with the time and money restrictions inherent to television animation some corners had to be cut here.

The beauty of this modern rebirth of *Lupin the Third* is the wide variety of interpretations. No longer does every installment have to slavishly pattern itself after what was groundbreaking over 40 years ago. Despite being perennially associated with the 1960s and 1970s, *Lupin* has proven it possibly to not only remain relevant in the 21st century, but be more popular than ever before without coasting on nostalgia.

***Lupin the Third Part Six* is available from Sentai Filmworks.**



THE YOUNG AND THE



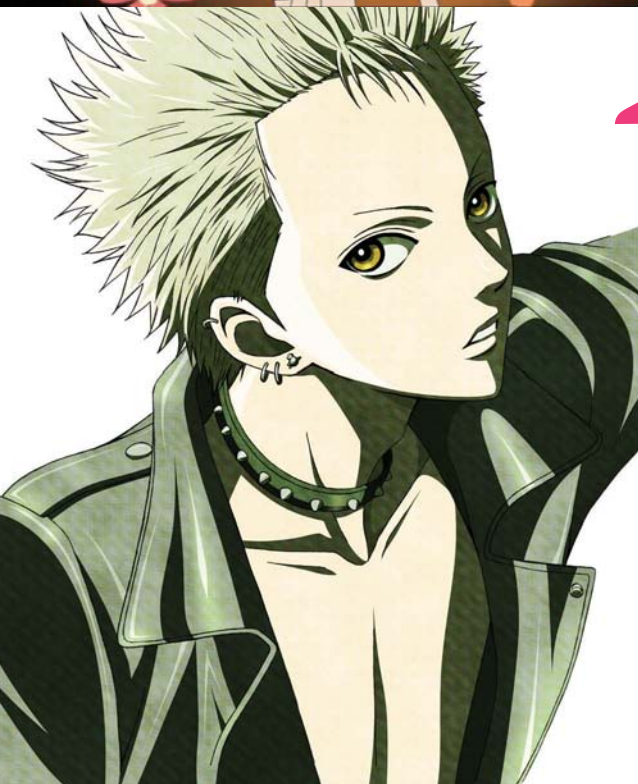
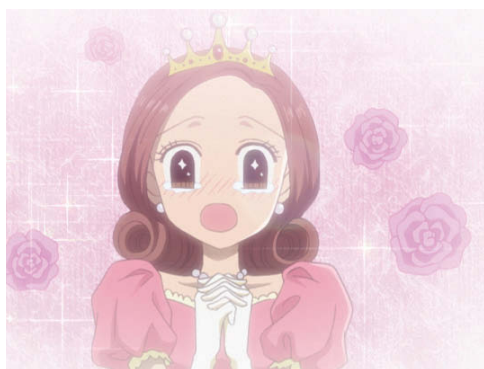
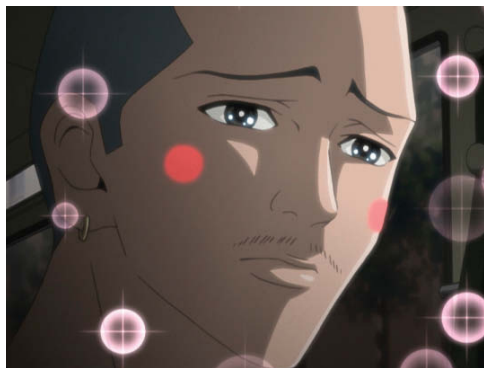
By Brittany Vincent

RESTLESS!

NANA is a legendary shoujo anime series that should not be missed.

© Yazawa Manga Seisakusho / Shueisha. © NTV / VAP / Shueisha / Madhouse.
Based on the comic NANA by Ai Yazawa originally serialized in "Cookie" published by SHUEISHA Inc.

April 2022 www.OtakuUSAmagazine.com OTAKU USA 85



What's in a name? When it comes to Ai Yazawa's legendary shoujo series *NANA*, two young women with the same namesake and two different last names come together as though they were destined to. One small town girl entering a new phase of her life and one looking to fulfill her rock star dreams come together in a chance meeting that could only be described as fate as they continue running into the other. It's a beautiful, heartrending adventure with as many highs as it has lows, and one of the most bittersweet anime series this side of Yazawa's other masterpiece *Paradise Kiss*. If you haven't seen *NANA*, now's the best time to jump in. Whether you're rooting for Nana K. or Nana O., there's a peek into the psyche of every young woman at the surface of this beautifully raw adventure. If this is your first time meeting the Nanas, then welcome aboard. If you've already been down this road before, go ahead and ready those tissues. It doesn't get any easier the second (or third!) time around.

Two Nanas at a Crossroads

NANA brings two unsuspecting young women together at two crucial points in their lives. It follows Nana Komatsu and Nana Osaki, two very different people. Nana Komatsu is a carefree and somewhat selfish girl who's setting off for Tokyo to follow her boyfriend and friends as they pursue their own educational careers. Nana Osaki, on the other hand, couldn't be more different. She's headed to Tokyo to strike off on her own as a rock star to make a name for herself. She's dark and mysterious, dressing on the stereotypical "goth" side. The pair eventually end up meeting on a train to Tokyo, where they share their stories briefly.

***NANA** is a beautiful, heartrending adventure with as many highs as it has lows, and it's one of the most bittersweet anime series this side of Yazawa's other masterpiece **Paradise Kiss**.*

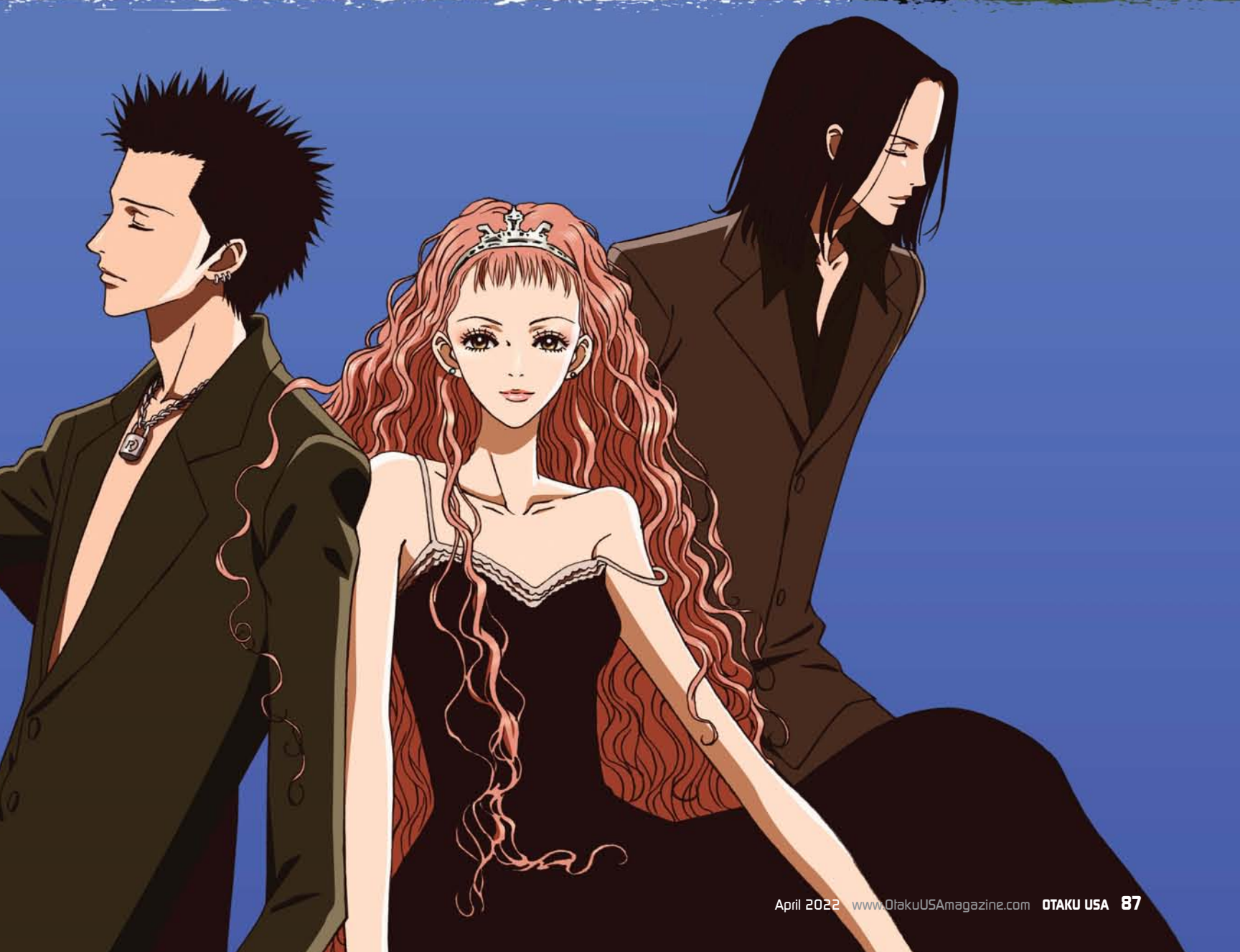
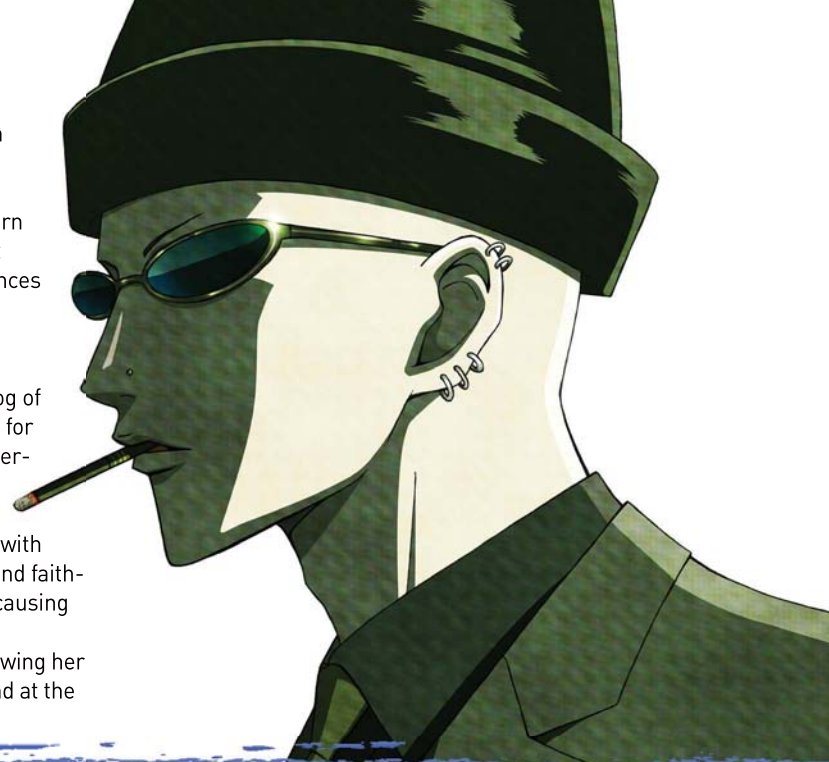


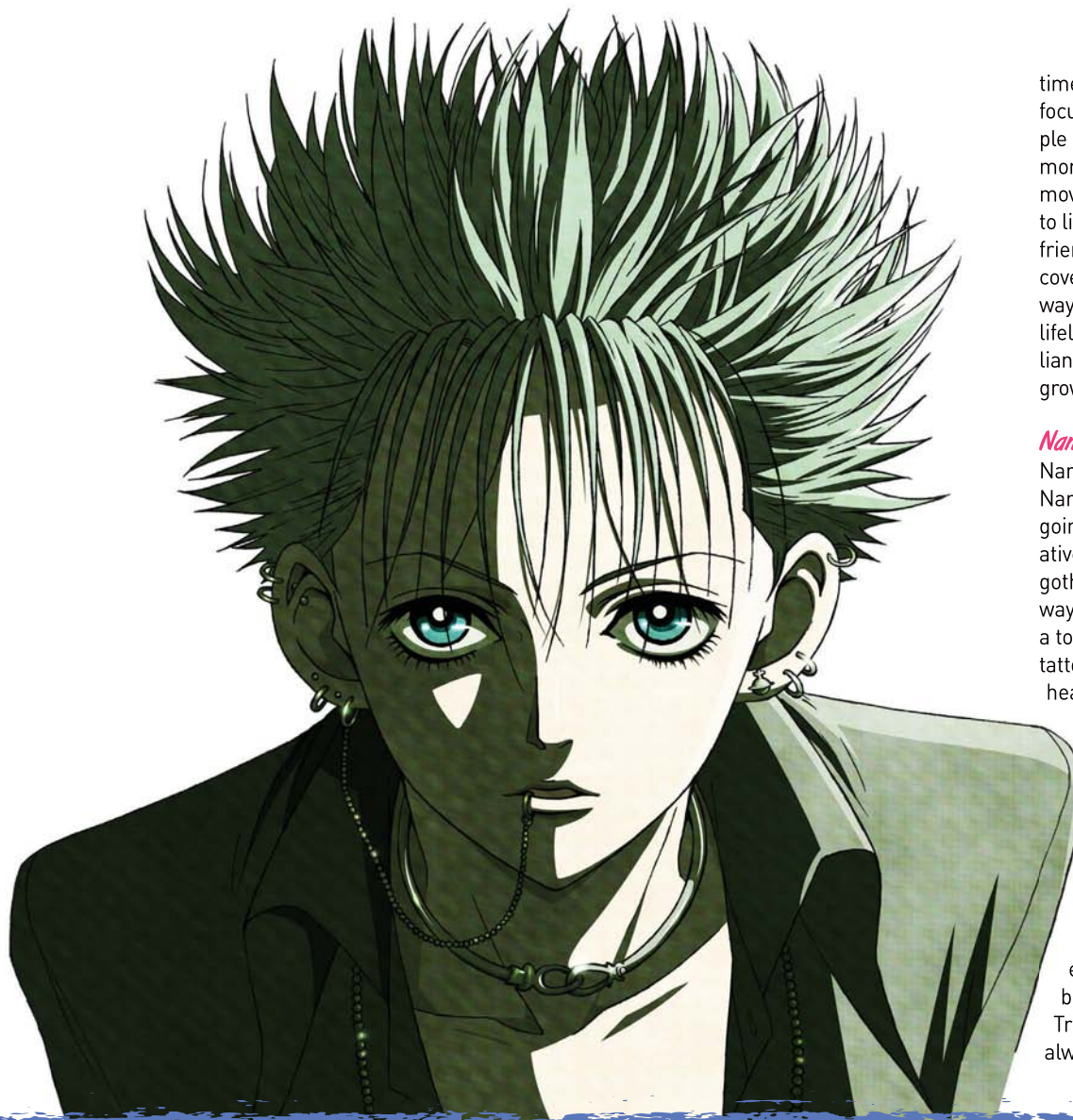
Their union is short-lived, but it's clear this pair was meant to meet. They're both around the same age, looking for something of a "new" beginning in Tokyo, which seems like something of a panacea for all the problems that ail them. It's a classic story, though we might normally hear of young women pursuing new lives in western cities like New York City or Los Angeles. Tokyo is the great unifier here, and while it starts off that both Nanas begin talking on the train, it kicks off a string of coincidences that prove they were meant to meet.

Nana "Hachi" Komatsu's Naiveté

Nana "Hachi" Komatsu earns her nickname as she seems like the loyal Hachiko dog of legend, the Akita who waited for his owner for 9 years after his death. It's the same for Nana, as she clings to anyone who shows her a little love or affection. Her bubbly personality and friendliness hide a self-centered, immature demeanor, the hallmarks of a young woman who's lived a sheltered life. Her childish outlook keeps her from forming lasting relationships, and she instead finds herself falling in love with men at first sight, especially older, unavailable and married men. Still, she's kind and faithful to those who treat her well, even if she makes a string of mistakes that end up causing her debilitating pain.

"Hachi" goes to Tokyo initially to pursue her dreams. At the time, that means following her friends, going to college to make their own dreams come true, because her boyfriend at the





time, Shouji, is also in Tokyo. Unfortunately, she focuses on the wrong things and the wrong people constantly. When she runs into Nana once more when apartment hunting, the pair end up moving in together after a failed attempt at trying to live with Shouji. Luckily, Hachi forms a solid friendship with the other Nana and the two discover they're kindred souls in more than a few ways. Thus, their chance meeting turns into a lifelong friendship punctuated by romantic dalliances, new and old dreams, and the type of growth as a person you have to fight for.

Nana Osaki's Quiet Sorrow

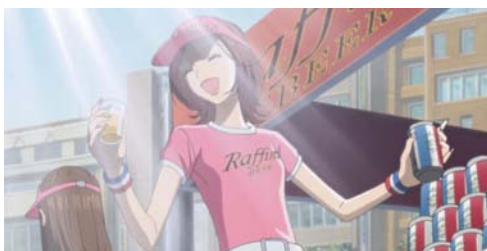
Nana Osaki couldn't be more different than Nana Komatsu. While Hachi is bubbly and outgoing, Nana Osaki is more of a darker, less talkative young woman who subscribes to the more gothic way of life, from her way of dress to the way she carries herself. But though she projects a tough image, with piercings, cigarettes, and tattoos, her punk rocker facade hides a kind heart and a devotion to her friends and loved ones that feels rare. She's also dark, somewhat emotional, and possessive of the ones she cares about. Her insecurities lead her into particularly unhealthy situations, and the fact that she's deeply in love with her boyfriend Ren is one of the things that keeps her going.

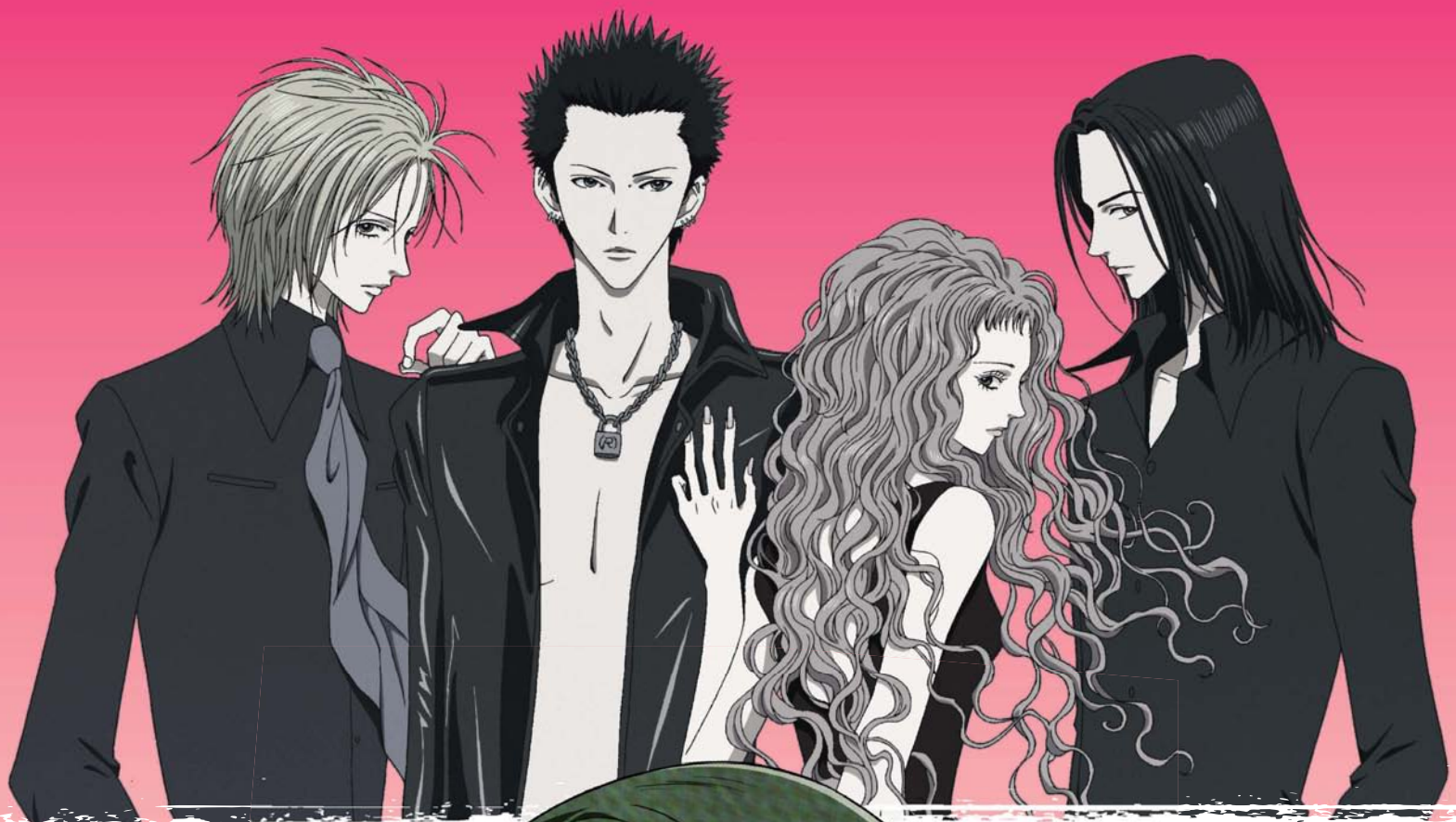
Nana is also the vocalist of the band Black Stones, which she went to Tokyo and eventually became a part of. After her boyfriend Ren decided to join "rival" band Trapnest, she's out to become the rocker she's always dreamt of being even as Ren plays with

THE STORY CONTINUES

It can feel like you've devoured both the lengthy *NANA* anime and manga series in the blink of an eye. Luckily, there are two live-action films you can jump into right after finishing the original manga and its anime adaptation. The original *Nana* film from 2005 finds pop star Mika Nakashima portraying Nana Osaki and Aoi Miyazaki as Nana Komatsu. Not only was the film a massive hit in Japan, but it helped to cement Mika Nakashima as a veritable force of nature in the music world. She released the single "Glamorous Sky" as part of a collaboration between the *NANA* film and her name, and it went straight to the top of the charts.

The film itself did a fantastic job of adapting the source material, too. It's a must-watch for anyone who finishes *NANA*'s manga and anime and needs something a little more, since the story unfortunately came to a close. The first movie doesn't adapt the entirety of the story, as that would be a little much for one theatrical installment, but there's good news. When you're finished with that, there's a sequel film to devour, too: *NANA 2*, which debuted in 2006. The outcome is the same, but the journey to see it all come to a thrilling conclusion is what counts, after all.





Trapnest and their particularly beautiful vocalist Reira. Despite growing up without her mother and father and dealing with all of these difficult situations, however, Nana still forges ahead, vowing to “polish the shards” of her dreams. With Hachi at her side, she’s able to accomplish things beyond her wildest imagination, even if life continues to remain as hard as it does for Hachi, only in other ways.

Two Nanas, Two Hearts

These two Nanas may have come together by chance and as two different people, but by the time you complete your journey with this iconic series, you’ll realize just how close they’ve become. Two young women, irrevocably affected by one another. It’s one of the best examples of how modern shoujo and drama can come together to make a story worthy of praise that more fans should absolutely spend more time with.

If you’re an Ai Yazawa fan and you want to see more of her works, start with *NANA*, make sure you have self-care plans in place, and dive right in. You won’t soon forget it.

*In **NANA**, a chance meeting turns into a lifelong friendship punctuated by romantic dalliances, new and old dreams, and the type of growth as a person you have to fight for.*

NANA is available from Sentai Filmworks.

In the distant future, long after civilization has collapsed and the upper world has been abandoned, what's left of mankind toughs it out in the bubbled colonies within the nightmarish environment called the Labyrinth (not the David Bowie kind, unfortunately), a world that full of gold, silver, and other riches so long as you can get past the brutal temperatures and monstrous herds of monsters. What's been discovered so far of the Labyrinth is barely hitting the tip of the iceberg, and it's a risky job for the Markers—the toughest of the tough who go head-first into the Labyrinth's innards no matter how dangerous the job.

Which brings us to nine-year-old Memempu and her father Gagumber, who barely scrape a living as Workers, the lowest of the low. So it shouldn't come as any surprise that they end up acquiring one of the mech armors—which they name Big Tony, by the way—so they can traverse the Labyrinth.

SAKUGAN—adapted from the light novel titled *Sakugan Labyrinth Marker*—is an anime about contradictions. With the Labyrinth, you have you this vast open world ripe for exploration and amazing adventures; but it's one full of danger where the slightest wrong turn can spell doom for you and your whole party. You think an anime like this would focus on the hotheaded rookie who's wielding some kind of special power with

his fists or whatever. Instead, we have a father-daughter duo looking to just make a decent living for themselves, which in itself is peculiar, as such relationships don't get the same spotlight as the more traditional father-son duo, especially in this kind of setting.

Despite the draw of adventure being the show's primary selling point, as of this writing, it may be one of things holding the anime back from striking gold. The best way I can describe it is contrasting it with the titular hole explored in *Made in Abyss*, which in itself is a pretty easy comparison. A lot of what we've seen so far only feels like it just scratches the surface of what can be found despite its best effort to breathe some semblance of characterization into its universe—that is to say—things we've already seen before—with such things as energy pipelines and bubbled decorating the environment. This contrasts with the almost-otherworldly layers populating the *Made in Abyss* underground (not to mention, downright freaky at some points).

Next you have, naturally, the robotic tussles on display. While the enemy kaiju desired feel very copy-and-paste, there's certainly plenty of energy to go around when it comes such robots as Big Tony, who strikes a balance between toylike and grounded logic that makes itself immediately noticeable to anyone watching. Studio State-light—the people behind the animation—has a

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

There's lots to dig about *SAKUGAN*, including robots, monsters, and adventure galore. | By Michael Goldstein





knack for designing some solid but recognizable CG mecha, and this anime continues this trend pretty well with some bouncy action sequences.

Of course, no robot can get off the ground without solid characters, which is where Memempu and Gagumber come in. There's been quite a lot of single-father anime lately,

with varying levels of success. Gagumber spent much of his youth as a Marker, and we can tell when we first meet him that he's well aware of how dangerous the underground world can get, which leaves him justifiably hesitant about getting his daughter involved. At the same time, however, he can't help but feel pretty ecstatic

about a spicy find. It's not difficult to see why he would be so overprotective of the only family member he has. Gagumber isn't what I'd call a bad father, but it is evident that he has his reservations based on experience. It's a solid emotional hook.

Memempu, meanwhile, isn't exactly as cautious as her father. She's a bundle of energy with a college degree—that's not a joke; she actually graduated with a degree in inventing things. I mean, I've heard of skipping a grade or two, but this is ridiculous (only in anime, I suppose)! And it's clear from the start that she's inherited her father's original thirst for adventure, except she wants to go even higher and see the world beyond the caves. We've all been that kid who was dangerously curious about things, and in the universe of *Sakugan*, Memempu fits that bill to a T. What I like about Memempu is that, although it'd be pretty obvious to make a walking textbook, the show makes sure to remind us that she's still

nine years old: she gets antsy when things do go her way; she suddenly feels like she can do anything one she accomplishes something; she even has booters pedals to operate Big Tony, for crying out loud.

Of course, the underground world is more like our own world than we originally thought, as

Gagumber is pretty hesitant to let her roam out there all by himself, even though he once had that some glimmer of youth in the past. This relationship, founded in something fictional but realistic, is the glue keeping *Sakugan* between its adventures and robot fights. In Memempu, we see that part of ourselves that wants more out of life, danger be damned. In Gagumber, we see something trying to support their daughter but still savvy to the risks and the disappointment that may accompany them.

So when you get down to it, *Sakugan*—currently streaming on Crunchyroll—isn't so much about the treasure at the end of the map, but rather the family we made along the way. The characters are quirky and the emotions are solid; and, of course, the mecha-kaiju showdowns rock. Of course, we're only roughly halfway into the series, so it's hard to say what direction the show will ultimately take all of this. The

biggest plot point at the moment is finding out who sent Memempu a mysterious map, and we have very few clues to go on at the moment. So far, though, it's been a pretty strong adventure, and I can't wait to see how down the rabbit hole goes.

***Sakugan* is available from Crunchyroll.**





**THE LABYRINTH IS A VAST, OPEN
WORLD, RIPE FOR EXPLORATION
AND AMAZING ADVENTURES;
BUT IT'S ONE FULL OF DANGER
WHERE THE SLIGHTEST WRONG
TURN CAN SPELL DOOM FOR YOU
AND YOUR WHOLE PARTY.**

Show & Tell!

There's a lot in *Komi Can't Communicate* that tends to be both whole, extreme, and ridiculous all at the same time. Does it get its point across?

By Michael Goldstein

The name on everyone's lips is "Komi Shouko." She's beautiful, graceful, and pretty much an ace at everything she does, even blinking, despite her apparent stoic, withdrawn attitude. At Itan Private High school, she's already made one heck of an impression by pretty much leaving everyone awestruck without saying a word. But once homeroom introductions are over, Tadano Hitohito discovers something interesting about Komi: it's not that she doesn't take issue with the popularity; she actually possesses some extreme level of social anxiety and has trouble communicating with others (hence, the title). After communicating with her via chalkboard, Komi reveals that her goal is to make a hundred friends. So, Tadano decides to be her first friend and promises to help her make ninety-nine more.

However, Tadano Hitohito, who notes himself is being quite capable of reading the room, has failed to realize one particular thing. Itan High School seems to value personality over anything else. As a result, the halls of this school are filled with oddballs, weirdos, heathens, loners, and Yamai Ren (we'll get to her

in just a bit). Thus, as the laws of anime comedy dictate, helping Komi make friends at this school is going to be a lot harder than it looks.

We've been down this route before: the high school girl that can do literally anything is the center of attention, and some hapless yuck has the fortune/misfortune of being paired with her, even though he appears to be completely average as if he's doing it on purpose. Normally this leads to some kind of wild, fantastical secret being discovered. However, the irony of *Komi Can't Communicate* is that Komi's secret just might make her the most normal person in the entire school. After all, how can you make friends when everyone thinks you're a goddess among mortals and you don't have the courage to correct them? It makes sense that Tadano, a guy who doesn't want to stand out, would be the first person to discover this. One can't communicate well, while the other, let's be frank, can't read a room.

Which brings us to the question of how to best describe this adaption being done by the good folks at OLM (who previously worked on the likes of *Odd Taxi* and *Pokémon*). Is it a gag

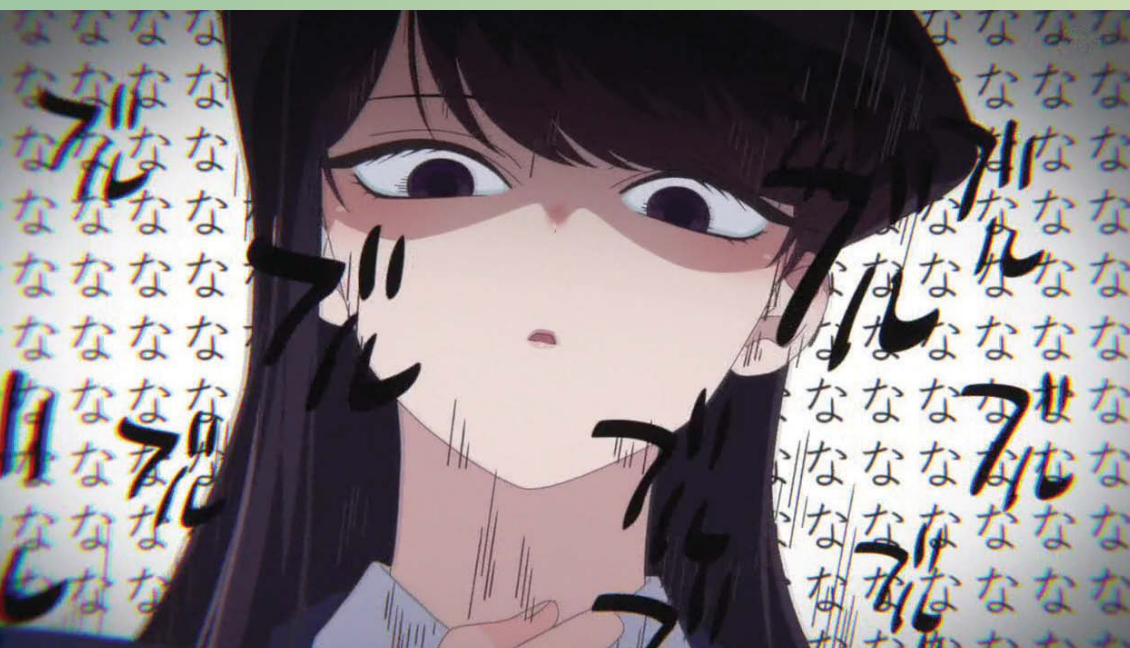
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comedy with a mental health angle? Is it a fluffy romantic drama whose comedy leans on someone's totally crippling anxiety? Or is it really Komi's world and we're all just living in it? Fortunately, Komi's anxieties are never the subject of ridicule. A lot of the show's gag humor can be traced to two sources, the first being the show's general art direction. This is one of those anime adaptations that adds on to the main premise and enhances the viewing experience. A lot of the gag humor is cranked up to eleven thanks to the way OLM adds frenetic motions and over-the-top facial expressions to translate many of the bonkers characters to the TV. Plus, Komi's Googly Eyes are just too adorable to ignore.

The second source is Tadano and the class as a whole. See, everyone in this school has a specific schtick, and his is being "extremely normal." This contrasts greatly with the rest of his class,



PUNS! GLORIOUS PUNS!

Perhaps one of the most significant elements of *Komi Can't Communicate* is how Itan High School house people that exhibit extreme personality traits; entry into the school is apparently based entirely on the student interviews, with personality being viewed as the most important aspect. This is even reflected in the characters' names, which all follow the characters' quirks. For example, Komi Shouko's name is derived from the word *komyushou*, which roughly translates as "communication disorder"; Tadano Hitohito is derived from the phrase *tada no hito*, literally "just some guy." The most on-the-nose is Osana Najimi, literally coming from *osananajimi*, or "childhood friend." In fact, you could probably list all of the characters *without* punny names on one hand.

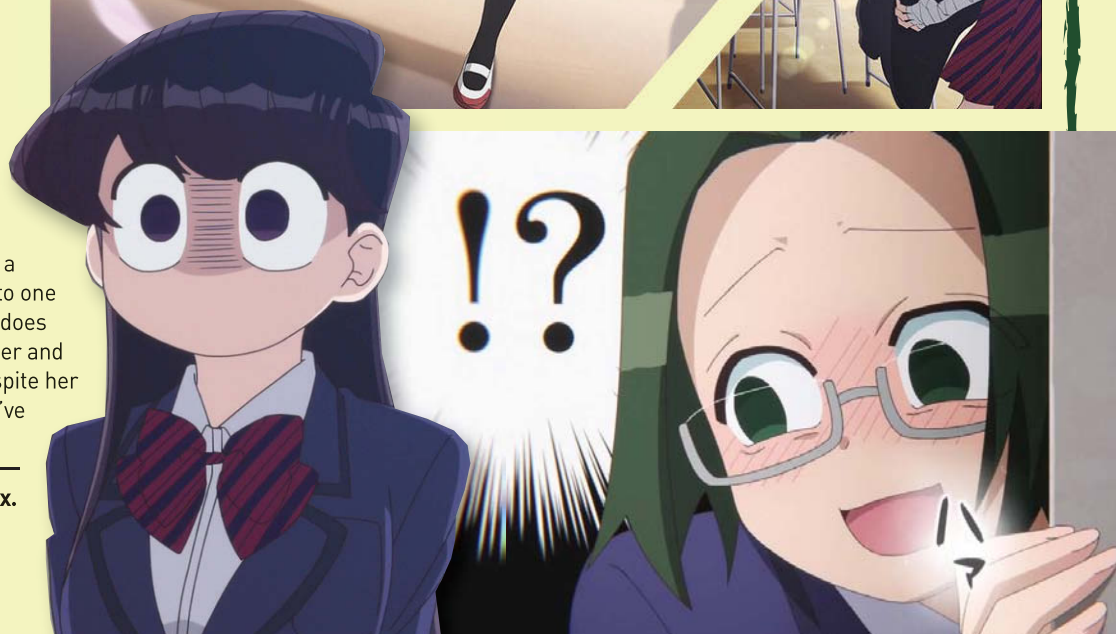
who, let's be real, are insane weirdos—you got the childhood friend, the shy girl, the chuunibyou, the competitive one, the yandere, some ninja guy, the list goes on. Tadano himself, despite being labeled as the average one, has his moments where he's just as bonkers as the rest of them.

Of particular note is Osana Najimi, the aforementioned childhood friend—of five million people, apparently—although calling Najimi a friend is like calling *Sonic '06* a masterpiece video game. They don't possess many of the conventional qualities of what we would consider a friend; they're very much a troll by choice. They're like that one person you can't shake off after interacting with them once and you can never get rid of them no matter how hard you try, but they'll actually stick with you to the very end. Their gender in particular has been subject of debate, as it's left pretty ambiguous through the entire run of the show. Now, I don't necessarily have the qualifications to comment on the fluidity of their gender, but I noticed that their characterization doesn't really rely much on their gender, and there's not much probing of it outside when it's first acknowledged. Not only that, they're driving most of the humor (partly because their gender is so up in air it messes with people and partly because they're such a troll), as opposed to being the punchline.

And then there's Yamai Ren. Hoo boy. How do you make a joke about something that's supposed to be a joke but really isn't? How do you make fun of an archetype when it kidnaps you and ties up and stuffs you in the closet? I mentioned that every character in *Komi's* class embodies some kind of cliché; in Yamai's case, it's the yandere archetype. Yeah, the archetype has been here before, and it'll be here long after we're gone. The problem is that *Komi Can't Communicate* is a comedy, and Yamai feels like she was put in the wrong show. Unlike the other characters, who are intentional exaggerations, what Yamai did in her real introduction (episode 4) wouldn't feel too out of place if this were a drama or thriller, especially when you realize that there was no indication beforehand that things were going to go *this* far. She never gets as bad as that afterward, but it's really hard to live it down. Obviously whether she's supposed to be psycho on purpose really depends on how you interpret the comedy.

Despite its questionable arrangement of characters, *Komi Can't Communicate*—currently streaming on Netflix—is very much a relatable show, albeit one that happens to be totally bonkers with all sorts of misfits. There's a level of commitment here of not trying to stick to one specific thing, but if there's one thing the show does well, it's the insane relatability of Komi's disorder and her desire to actually do something normal despite her struggles with her anxieties. And I really hope I've communicated all of that!

Is Komi Can't Communicate a gag comedy with a mental health angle? Is it a fluffy romantic drama whose comedy leans on someone's totally crippling anxiety? Or is it really Komi's world and we're all just living in it?



***Komi Can't Communicate* is available from Netflix.**

Godzilla, Monster, Goblin

A smog monster, spider creatures, and funky yokai

Godzilla vs. Hedorah

Created exclusively for the *Godzilla Fest 2021* event, director Kazuhiro Nakagawa's



STUDIO/COMPANY
Toho (Via YouTube)

RELEASE DATE
2021

RUNNING TIME
5 Minutes

five-minute *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* is impressive but also unoriginal. Made to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the original *Godzilla* vs. *Hedorah*, it was also released on the 67th anniversary of *Godzilla* (1954). Streamed and

uploaded to YouTube, it invokes Toho's old *Godman* TV segments in that it's just a self-contained monster battle. *Godzilla* (the suit inhabited by Naoya Matsumoto) battles Hedorah the Smog Monster (Hikaru Yoshida) once again. It's a sim-



plistic but fun little short, filmed in several days on an outdoor set at Toho in September 2021. The suits were the still-surviving costumes made by Shinichi Wakasa 17 years ago for *Godzilla: Final Wars*. They look like they've probably been given restoration work, though the use of state-of-the-art materials in Toho's final monster suits has also helped them keep in shape better. This short is laden with shoutouts to *Showa*, *Heisei* and *Millennium* entries prior. *Godzilla* has the '80s roar, the title card is 1990s *Heisei* entry style, and soundtrack cues from *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* and *Godzilla: Final Wars* play abound.

Director Kazuhiro Nakagawa, along with Daisuke Sato, is an up and coming Millennial talent in what's left of Japan's tokusatsu industry. He began his career as an assistant to Shinji Higuchi on films like *The Floating Castle* (2012), the much-reviled live-action *Attack on Titan* (2015), and *Shin Godzilla* (2016). He also helmed the inventive short *Day of the Kaiju* (2014) and the *Godzilla vs. Evangelion 4-D* attraction at Universal Japan. Parts of his *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* indeed invoke his mentor Higuchi's work, particularly in the final moments. Parts are inventively directed, such as effective low-angle shots and a simulated long take that opens the short. At the

same time, *Godzilla vs. Hedorah '21* brings little new to the table that hasn't been seen before in prior kaiju battle sequences. Nakagawa evokes his mentors Anno and Higuchi along with Yoshimitsu Banno, Teruyoshi Nakano, Ryuhei Kitamura and others. Yet nothing feels "Kazuhiro Nakagawa". The crispness of modern, high-definition digital cinematography also does the tokusatsu medium few favors, making the suits look "rubbery". Overall, however, a classical, tokusatsu-style monster short produced by Toho is a refreshing surprise, and here's hoping they make more of them.

—J.L. Carrozza



STUDIO/COMPANY

Arrow Video

RELEASE DATE

1968

RUNNING TIME

80 minutes

Yokai Monsters: 100 Monsters

While giant monsters may have been falling out of favor with kids, a more traditional and ghostly form of monster was becoming popular with the 1965 publication of the popular manga *GeGe no Kitaro* by Shigeru Mizuki. This “Yokai Boom” would only intensify when a TV anime

adaptation of *Kitaro* from Toei in January of 1968 began airing. Like Western vampires and werewolves, *yokai* are ghostly old-world monstrosities of folklore far removed from the atomic age



terrors of Godzilla or Gamera. Being malevolent Shinto spirits, each region in Japan has its own distinctive local yokai. With their 1968 tokusatsu horror film *100 Monsters*, double-billed with *Gamera vs. Viras*, Daiei sought to tap into the popularity of *GeGe no Kitaro*. The film centers around the *Hyaku Monogatari Kaidankai*, a sort of storytelling game popularized in the Edo period. In it, a group of people gather and light one hundred candles before telling one hundred ghostly stories. With the *Hyaku Monogatari* as a backdrop, *100 Monsters* tells a similar story to Yasuda's previous *Majin*. Once again, a supernatural force liberates the common people from oppression. This time it's crooked landowners trying to demolish a shrine to build a brothel. Fittingly, the leader and his right hand man are played by Ryutomi Gomi and Takashi Kanda, both of whom played warlords in the *Majin* films. Actors Miwa Takada and Jun Fujimaki also return from the first *Majin*.

The talented, engineer-minded Yoshiyuki Kuroda also returns from the *Majin* films to handle the plentiful effects phantasmagoria, along with Fujio Morita. *100 Monsters* was largely co-helmed by director Yasuda and effects director

Kuroda. Yasuda, quite passionate about this project as he loved yokai, storyboarded the entire film himself in an office filled with drawings of the various yokai as inspiration. *100 Monsters* feels closer in tone to an early J-Horror film like the works of Nobuo Nakagawa than to a tokusatsu monster movie. Nonetheless, the use of tokusatsu FX and trick photography is even more plentiful than in the *Majin* films. Kuroda's best sequences feature abundant phantasmagorical spectacle. An early highlight is a sequence with a *rokurokubi* (played by Ikuko Mori): a woman who can stretch her neck to serpentine lengths. This effect is stunningly executed, and the sequence features some of Kuroda and Morita's most inventive trick pho-

tography. Actress Mori's debut



was in 1957's *The Invisible Man vs. the Human Fly*, and she soon became a popular screen siren, strongly associated with snakes after appearing in *White Snake Beauty* (1959). Her *rokurokubi* role was a subtle throwback to this. Tragically, shortly after appearing in 1969's *The Haunted Castle*, she stabbed her lover, whom she had an out-of-wedlock child with, to death. The first active and famous actress to commit murder, Mori's trial was one of the Showa Japanese film industry's grandest scandals. She was released on parole in 1977 and subsequently disappeared, her fate unknown.

Another good sequence features Bava-esque colored lighting and the *Nopperabo* (“No Face”), a ghostly spirit with no eyes, nose or ears. Another distinctive creation is the *Karakasa* or *Kasa Obake*, a one-eyed, one-legged goblin taking the form of an umbrella. Played by an intricate marionette manipulated with piano wire, it looks like something from the combined sensibilities of Jim Henson, Sid and Marty Kroft and Tim Burton. The puppet took six people to oper-

ate. Cel and optical animation was needed for certain sequences, and Tomio Sagisu's P-Productions were hired to provide it. Their most memorable contribution is a series of impressive shots featuring an animated painted *Karakasa* on a sliding door.

The *100 Monsters* finale, where a large gaggle of yokai converge on the landowner, is weaker in execution than *Majin*'s. Whereas the *Majin* films felt extremely dynamic, this scene is a bit pedestrian, as evidenced by a static shot that goes on for around half a minute. In many ways, however, the clunkier execution is forgivable, as a hundred yokai are a more ambitious FX goal than one giant monster. The strongest bits feature the *Okubi* (or “Big Head,” played by Keiko Koyanagi), a gigantic floating female head making use of the bluescreen processes perfected in *Majin*. Its well-executed, giant, humanoid



grotesquery strongly looks forward to the popular *Attack on Titan* franchise. The *yokai* themselves are intriguing. Building a hundred apparitions was quite the challenge for Masao Yagi and Equis Productions, who were already occupied with modeling for *Gamera vs. Viras*. To ease the burden, some old costumes from *Suzunosuke Akado* (1957) and *Buddha* (1961) were used for certain yokai. The film's final moments are their very best as the yokai parade in a macabre funeral procession before the crack of dawn. The double-bill of *Gamera vs. Viras* and *100 Monsters* would prove a surprise hit for Daiei, and two more *Yokai Monsters* films followed.

—J.L. Carrozza

Hiruko the Goblin



STUDIO/COMPANY
Third Windows Films

RELEASE DATE
1991

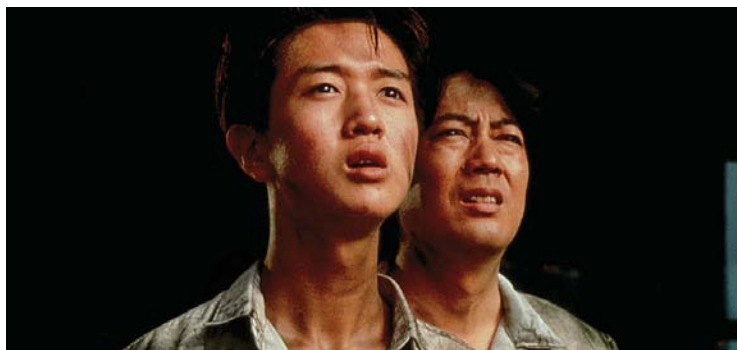
RUNNING TIME
89 Minutes

On the heels of his demented, highly successful indie *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), director Shinya Tsukamoto was hired by Shochiku to adapt the popular 1970s manga “Yokai Hunter”

by Danjiro Morohoshi. *Hiruko the Goblin*, released in 1991 smack between *Tetsuo* movies, is by far one of Tsukamoto’s most “mainstream”

nephew Masao (Masaki Kudo) goes searching through the schoolhouse with his uncle and finds two of his friends gruesomely murdered. Initially they suspect the school’s creepy janitor (veteran yakuza star Hideo Murota), who like any good creepy janitor in a horror movie threatening tells them to get off the property. It turns out, however, that Reiko’s severed head, which has grown an arachnid-like legs, is responsible, possessed by the demon Hiruko.

Hiruko the Goblin shows its manga origins strongly and was shot on location at a junior high school in Toyama Prefecture. Tsukamoto’s demented style, natu-



films. Yet it still boasts his trademark style and the director’s quirky style shines through the confines of a more commercial project.

Archeologist Reijiro Hieda (Kenji “Julie” Sawada) receives a letter from his brother-in-law Professor Yabe (Naoto Takenaka) telling of an ancient burial mound he found on the property of the high school he teaches at. Yabe and his student Reiko (Megumi Ueno) investigate the mound and disappear. Heida soon arrives in the small town to investigate. Yabe’s son and Heida’s

rally, comes out most in the horror sequences. There are steadicam-across-the-floor shots very reminiscent of *The Evil Dead* (1982). Tsukamoto, FX supervisor Eichi Asada and their modeling team also heavily channels Rob Bottin’s work in *The Thing* (also 1982). Moments are hauntingly beautiful, with Dario Argento-like atmosphere, particularly the disembodied head of Reiko singing a siren-like song to lull her victims to complacency. Tsukamoto drew the most on his childhood fear of the dark, a



thing he almost feels nostalgia for now as modern Tokyo, shrouded in neon lights, has little of that darkness now. This is why he chose to set *Hiruko* in the rural country in stark contrast to the urban horror of the *Tetsuo* films.

The puppetry and stop-motion

effects in *Hiruko* are quite inventively executed. Of any film in Tsukamoto’s filmography, it was his closest collaboration with the *tokusatsu* (special effects) industry. The film’s DP was Masahiro Kishimoto, soon to lens five *Godzilla* entries. Assisting Tsukamoto in the

creation of the monster sequences was Toho effects technician Eichi Asada, later to helm the special effects unit on *Godzilla: Tokyo SOS* (2003) and *Godzilla: Final Wars* (2004). Asada and his team enjoyed working with Tsukamoto, as he had a clear idea of what he wanted. Modeler Takashi Oda, who soon after joined *Tetsuo II*, worked from drawings Tsukamoto had made to create the various Hiruko monsters. Various arthropods were a major influence in their design, and 12 different types of Hiruko creatures were built. Some were motorized, others were hand puppets, and smaller, jointed replicas were used for stop-motion shots. Sometimes mechanical legs were attached to the actors' heads, and doll versions for throwing around were also made. The modeling team was quite pressed for time and had to set up shop inside one of the classrooms at the location. Some of the Hiruko puppets were moved by radio control and others with old-school tokusatsu wire-work. Fuchimu Shimakura, a veteran of Eiji Tsuburaya's effects unit, even created the painted backgrounds for a few shots.

Hiruko the Goblin, admittedly, barely feels like a Shinya Tsukamoto film. To the director, however, *Hiruko* is a very personal film. Tsukamoto merely approached *Hiruko* from a different mindset than the *Tetsuo* movies. Major inspiration came from the *Shonen Drama* line of TV shows on NHK in the '70s, which Tsukamoto had loved as a youth. Tsukamoto notes that a frequent trope of his, a young girl's death opening the story, unconsciously originated in *Hiruko*. The ending even boasts some apocalyptic overtones. According to Tsukamoto, Reiko's spirit streaming into the sky is a metaphor of sorts for how he hopes there may be something beautiful left over after humanity wipes itself out. Overall, if the hyperkinetic madness of *Tetsuo* is what you're expecting, *Hiruko* will be a major disappointment, but the picture is engaging J-Horror.

—J.L. Carrozza is the author of *SF: The Japanese Science Fiction Film Encyclopedia* and the upcoming *Japanese Special Effects Cinema: Godfathers of Tokusatsu*.

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4. Winners will be selected at random from all eligible entries by random drawing held on or about March 8, 2022.

You need not be present to win. Winners will be notified by telephone, mail, or email. All taxes and any other fees or costs associated with the acceptance or use of any prize are the sole responsibility of the winners. Winners may be required to execute and notarize an affidavit of eligibility and publicity consent and release. Otaku USA Magazine and/or Sovereign Media, Inc., reserves the right to require the affi-

davit of eligibility at its sole discretion or as required by law. If a winner fails to return a properly signed affidavit within ten (10) days of mailing or if any prize notification or prize is returned as undeliverable, the winner will be disqualified and an alternative winner will be selected. If there is a dispute as to the owner of an email address, it will be deemed submitted by the email account holder per the records of the email service provider. Each winner accepting a prize consents to the use of his/her name and likeness for promotional and publicity purposes without further compensation, unless prohibited by law. (When requested to do so, each winner agrees to report for publicity photograph sittings at such place as may be designated by the sponsors of this Giveaway, unless prohibited by law). For a list of prize winners and/or Official Rules, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: Otaku Giveaway, Sovereign Media, 2406 Reach Road, Williamsport PA 17701. Please be sure to specify whether you are requesting Official Rules or a winners list (available after the winners are verified). Vermont residents may omit postage for Official Rules and the entry postcard.

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6. Prizes are not transferable. A prize will be returned as undeliverable or otherwise not claimed within fifteen (15) days after the delivery notification will be forfeited and awarded to an alternate winner.

7. The Giveaway Winner may be asked to produce a valid driver's license or other valid form of identification and/or requested to execute an affidavit of eligibility and/or other release.

8. No substitutions or exchanges (including for cash) or any prizes will be permitted, except that the Sponsor reserves the right to substitute a prize of equal or greater value for any prize.

9. All applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations apply and Giveaway is void where prohibited.

10. Sponsors will not be responsible for: (a) any late, lost, misrouted, garbled or distorted or damaged transmissions or entries; (b) telephone, electronic, hardware, software, network, Internet, or other computer or communications related malfunctions or failures; (c) any Giveaway disruptions, injuries, losses or damages caused by events beyond the control of Sponsor; or (d) any printing or typographical errors in any materials associated with the Giveaway.

11. Viz Media: Pokémon The Series: Diamond and Pearl Complete Collection (1 winner), Seis Manos, Season 1 (2 winners) and JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Diamond is Unbreakable: Chapter 1 (Live-Action Movie) (1 winner). Bandai Spirits Co., Ltd: Figuarts mini Ram (1 winner) and Figuarts mini Rem (1 winner).

YOU MUST ENTER TO WIN. Fill out an entry card or the entry form on the website, mail or submit, and you're entered!

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba - The Hinokami Chronicles

Bringing the anime to roaring life



PUBLISHER
SEGA

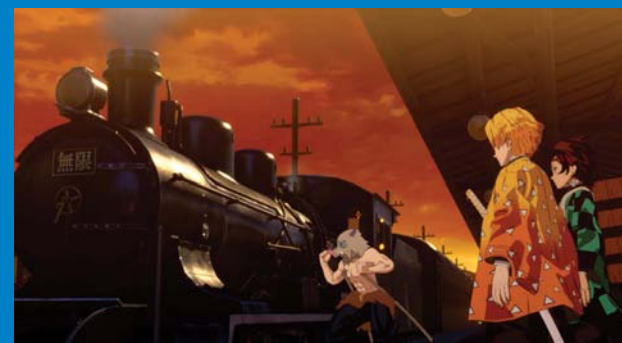
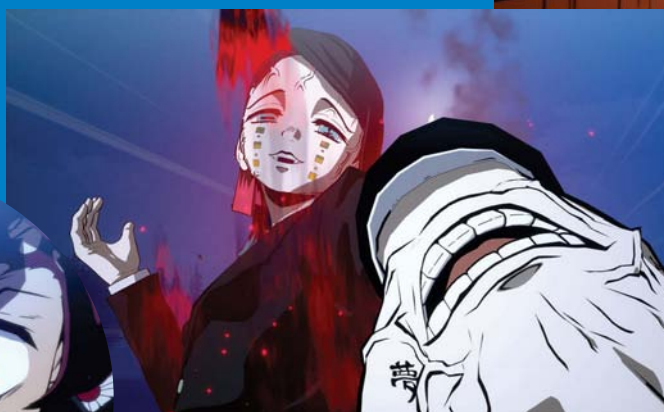
DEVELOPER
CyberConnect2

SYSTEM(S)
PS4, PS4, Xbox One,
Xbox Series, PC

RATING
T

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba is one of the most popular anime series out there. And, like every popular anime series, it's been given a chance to shine in another medium: the realm of video games. *Demon Slayer:*

Kimetsu no Yaiba - The Hinokami Chronicles is a stalwart, impressive effort from studio CyberConnect2. The same team that



brought *Naruto* to life in the form of various video games has done a fantastic job translating exactly what has made the show such a hit to current and next-gen platforms.

It's clear to see the same talent and love went into bringing *Demon Slayer* to life, as it looks essentially like playing an episode of the anime. This adventure covers most of the series' first season, including up to and during the events of the *Mugen Train* feature. That means you'll get plenty of time as Tanjiro,

and get to see him interacting with series mainstays as he takes part in a variety of demon-slaying missions. It's all a part of the story mode, a fast-paced yet highly interactive mode that plays a bit more like a hack-and-slash game crossed with a fighter.

As Tanjiro, you'll explore the world laid out in front of you, collecting items, seeking out waypoints, and eliminating the enemies in the way as you head over there. This is a fighting game dressed up as an RPG with linear paths, but it's a very fun and flashy fighting game, with many of the same kinds of elements we saw in the earlier *Naruto* games. You'll string together combos that culminate in gorgeously animated abilities, ripped straight from the small screen.

It's fun to block opponents, parry, and unleash absolute hell on your enemies over and over again. And even though your special moves can get a little old after a while, since you'll be pulling them off again and again, that doesn't detract from how great they look in the first place. And that's not even mentioning boss fights, which do change up the formula a bit. Where you can get away with typical parries with regular enemies, boss encounters require specific timing, well-timed button presses for quick time events, and feature some particularly fantastic-looking scenes. Tanjiro and the gang have never looked this good.

Working your way through the story mode rewards you with a variety of additional character unlocks, costumes, gallery images, and

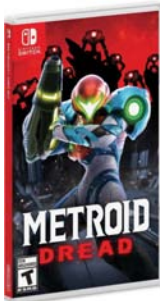
more. But there's plenty to do outside of the story mode, too. You can opt for versus battles, online multiplayer (when you can find an opponent), and chill out with your goodies once you've unlocked them. The story content will keep you busy for some time, however, to the tune of 15 to 20 hours of content.

Whether you're a huge fan of the *Demon Slayer* series in general or are looking for something to gobble up post *Mugen Train* madness and in between seasons, you'll want to snap up *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba - The Hinokami Chronicles*, even if only to marvel at how closely it resembles its source material. We're getting very close to being able to "play" the anime series we love, and that's an exciting thought.

—Brittany Vincent

Metroid Dread

Putting a bow on Samus' saga



PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Nintendo, Mercury Steam

SYSTEM(S)
Switch

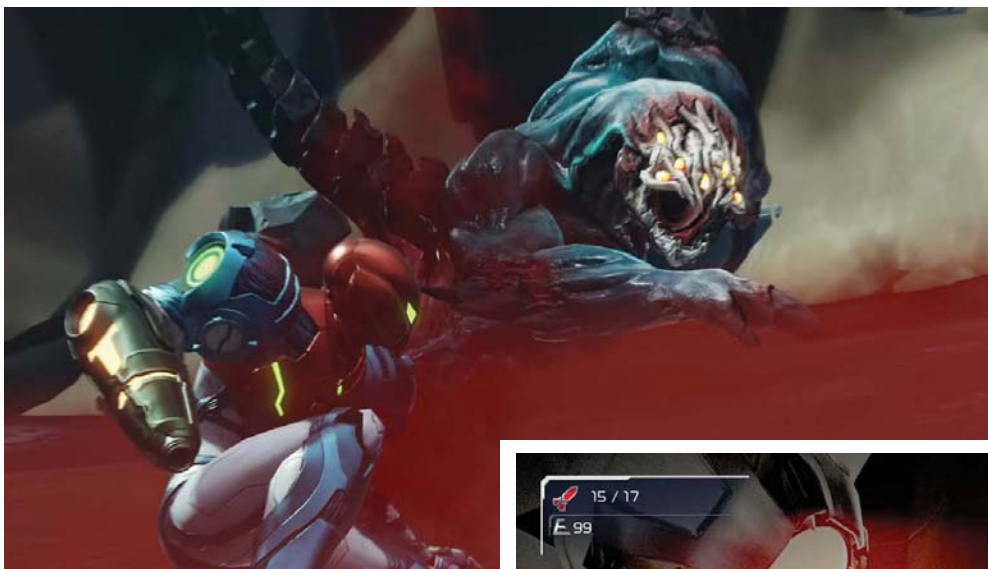
RATING
T

It's been a long road for *Metroid Dread*, which was first revealed as a followup to *Metroid Fusion* way back in 2005. *Dread* was thought dead for quite some time, but thanks to the development efforts of Nintendo and Mercury Steam—who previously tackled the series with 3DS remake *Metroid: Samus Returns*—the latest mainline entry is here to put a fantastic and decently challenging bow on Samus' saga.

If Samus thought her work was done after *Fusion*, she's got another thing coming.

Mercury Steam really nailed Samus' movement, so the most important part of any game in this exploratory genre—hey, it feels kind of weird to call a *Metroid* game a *Metroidvania*, right?—makes it a pleasure to traverse. Samus can run, slide, roll, and flip with the best of 'em, and once you get all of her abilities back she's practically unstoppable. Those abilities are pretty smartly spaced out and applied, too. Heck, unless you're a devoted speedrunner, you won't even get the iconic Morph Ball until you're about an hour or two deep.

The E.M.M.I. encounters are spread out across the map in dedicated zones that the robots can't leave. Once Samus is in one of the zones, though, she goes from hunter to hunted, and these increasingly clever, fast, and seemingly indestructible robots will track her down with



Thanks to some footage the Galactic Federation received, it appears the X Parasites survived the destruction of SR388, so seven E.M.M.I. robots were sent to investigate the transmission's source, a planet known as ZDR. The unit has since vanished, however, so it's up to Samus to investigate for herself and seek out the truth behind the X Parasites and anything else that may be lurking at her destination.

It turns out a living Chozo known as Raven Beak has other plans for Samus, and as such has repurposed the E.M.M.I. robots to become her greatest threat yet. These robo-showdowns are one of the main centerpieces of what is otherwise the type of side-scrolling *Metroid* game we should all be intimately familiar with by now. Planet ZDR is split up into different areas, and Samus will gradually need to get her Power Suit and abilities back up to their former heights if she wants to fully explore everything the deadly local environment has to offer.

the quickness to apply a brutal one-hit kill. Samus has one chance to use her parry attack to deflect this attack, but if they catch you, consider your goose cooked nine times out of ten. There's a certain rhythm to these encounters, and they're certainly tense, but everything from the



robot design to the routine way in which they're eventually dispatched was my least favorite aspect of *Dread*.

Towering far above them are all of the excellent boss fights Samus has to look forward to. From lightning-fast Mawkin showdowns to colossal returning foes, each of these tests the skills you've picked up along the way thus far. The final boss fight is one I would best describe as "rad as hell," and even though it took me a couple dozen attempts to conquer it, it ended the game with a truly white-knuckle knockout.

It's too early to tell where *Metroid Dread* falls in my list of favorite Samus outings, but it's definitely up there. I don't see it eclipsing *Super Metroid* any time soon, but it's a worthy followup, and will go down as one of the best



games to be released in 2021. Hopefully we won't have to wait as long for our next 2D *Metroid* adventure, but at least we have this to replay again and again until *Metroid Prime 4* finally arrives.

—Joseph Luster

Animal Crossing: New Horizons—Happy Home Paradise

The DLC we've been waiting for!



PUBLISHER
Nintendo
DEVELOPER
Nintendo
SYSTEM(S)
Switch
RATING
E

Just when we thought we discovered everything in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, Nintendo comes out with more fun adventures in the form of additional paid content. You can now create the vacation resort of your dreams with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons—Happy Home Paradise*.

It's easy to see the influence *Animal Crossing* has had on players over the last two years—spending hours furnishing your home and decorating your island was easy (this reviewer may or may not

have 500+ hours logged in the game). You were allowed to let your imagination run wild with the number of options to decorate your island, but once you hit a five-star island rating, there was not much left to discover other than new seasonal items from Nook Shopping or small monthly



updates. The core game had plenty to do, but still, many players took it upon themselves to take it up a notch and create their own makeshift shops and facilities with items made available.

Happy Home Paradise entices fans to pick up their controllers again for more adorable con-



Shin Megami Tensei V

Odd Future



PUBLISHER
Atlus, SEGA
DEVELOPER
Atlus
SYSTEM(S)
Switch
RATING
M

Though much of the world has been enamored with Atlus's *Persona* series over the past few years, many don't realize it's a spinoff of the long-running cult classic RPG series, *Shin Megami Tensei*. The mainline series is a decidedly different one from *Persona*, with a darker tone and more complex gameplay mechanics. It can be a bit of a departure for fans who aren't familiar with its unique gameplay mechanics, but that's also part of the fun.

Shin Megami Tensei V, the first new installment of the "MegaTen" games for the Nintendo Switch, clings steadfast to the games' conventions, changing little and refusing to conform to modern game design or tone that *Persona* has over the years. And while that might be what some fans have clamored for since they've been waiting tirelessly for a new entry, it likely won't win over new converts anytime soon.

Shin Megami Tensei V jumps right into the storyline with little fanfare. You take on the role of a

student at the Tokyo-based Jouin High School. The school finds itself in the middle of some violent attacks, and as such is asking students to walk home in groups to avoid



future incidents. As fate would have it, your group walks home together, only to stop at the train station, with the path to the dormitories cut off by a strange curtain.

There's been a murder in the station, which leads the students to try and figure out an alternate path to the dorms. After a failed expedition to find one of your classmates' friends, your protagonist is eventually knocked out during a serious earthquake and subse-



tent. Unlike most DLC, players can choose to pay \$24.99 for the pack or gain access to the update with a Switch Online + Expansion Pack membership for \$49.99. After downloading *HHP*, you'll meet a new cast of characters who are in charge of bringing new visitors and vacationers to a string of islands. You'll be recruited by Lottie, who, unlike Tom Nook, wants your help in exchange for cold hard cash—well poki. Yay to no more free labor!

Your new gig is to attract new customers looking for their own vacation home. As the Paradise Planning representative and designer, you can decorate to your heart's content. Once you're ready, you can now "travel to work" from your island's airport. Speak to Orville to make your way to your new job and employ your best decorating skills to attract new customers.

The appeal of the DLC is the sheer amount of decorating options you'll gain through helping Lottie and the Paradise Planners create the perfect vacation home for characters. It's your job to find new vacationers and follow their design preferences. Design-loving players will find joy in the number of customizations that are possible in *HHP*. Everything from the yard, house structure, and



the interior are up for customization, and there are plenty more options to choose from there. Want to create a fenced-in garden or make the house larger? Done and done! How about creating separate rooms or splash walls, you ask?

You got it! And the true icing on the cake is that money is not a concern while designing, as furniture or remodeling doesn't cost you a penny.

Once you begin to successfully complete homes, you can move on up to furnishing facilities. Everything from a school to a cafe and restaurant is now available to decorate. It's as if the *Animal Crossing* team paid attention to players' asks and were influenced to include things players were already creating from the start. Which is how new content should be created. The fun doesn't stop there. New tricks learned from working can be used on your own island, such as adding room partitions or making your furniture sparkle with a new cleaning option. Nintendo has thought of just about everything to make *HHP* worth the price tag.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is popular for a reason, and now thanks to the *Happy Home Paradise* pack, players can sink their teeth into even more hours of play. If you love *Animal Crossing*, consider grabbing the DLC to ease back into the game and learn some new tricks along the way.

—Brianna Fox-Priest

quent tunnel collapse. Upon waking, you're no longer in Tokyo, but a nightmarish, post-apocalyptic version of it instead.

You've got to keep your wits about you as you end up attacked by demons, who leave you for dead. A mysterious man known as Aogami offers you his life force by fusing with you, effectively transforming you into a being known as a Nahobino. From there, the story is meted out between turn-based encounters with demons, where you'll work to obliterate them while sussing out the major plot points that make up a disturbing war between angels and demons.

Post-apocalyptic Tokyo seems like one large desert area, and you'll have plenty of opportunities to explore it. The paths are refreshingly less linear than other games in the series, but the repetition that comes with fighting enemies in turn-based combat over and over, as well as some of the required backtracking you'll need to tackle to move forward, can make it feel a bit like a slog.

Thankfully, systems like the Demon Negotiation and Fusion options offer a reprieve from the grind. You can recruit most demons you meet to your party by answering questions correctly. You may also have to give the demon an item or

money (Macca). You'll have to learn how to negotiate properly if you want a strong set of demons fighting for you, then harness their powers with the game's fusion system. You can combine demons into beings much more powerful than you begin with, a mainstay for the *MegaTen* and *Persona* series, which makes for some fun reasons to try to acquire every demon you can, much like *Pokémon*.

While there's plenty of excitement to be had within *Shin Megami Tensei V*, it's important to remember it can be a bit of a difficult grind, too. The game can be downright punishing

if you don't work to level up accordingly. This is something of a hallmark from previous *MegaTen* games, but it may not be something fans of *Persona* games expect going in.

Overall, *Shin Megami Tensei V* is an exciting new installment that builds upon the classic setup of games past, while offering new and interesting mechanics all its own. But it isn't the complete overhaul that the series has needed for so long. Still, there's plenty to enjoy about it, and a story that's well worth strapping in for. Though if this is your first *MegaTen* game, you might want to opt for *Persona* first to get your sea legs.

—Brittany Vincent



Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water

Shriek Show



PUBLISHER
Koei Tecmo

DEVELOPER
Koei Tecmo

SYSTEM(S)
Switch

RATING
M

The *Fatal Frame* series is absolutely terrifying, from top to bottom. It's been chilling players since the original game debuted on PlayStation 2 in 2001, all the way through the Wii U in 2014 with *Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water*. It's been eight years since anyone has heard a peep out of Koei Tecmo's survival horror game series, but that all changed with the move from Wii U to Nintendo Switch for the most recent entry. While it's unfortunately not a brand new game, it does

mark the first time the *Fatal Frame* games have seen representation on a new console. Was it worth making the jump? Not this time around.

Obviously, the Switch version of *Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water* is preferable to the old Wii U version, since you can't just head out to the store and pick up anything you need for a Wii U console anymore. But this port isn't everything it



could have been, unfortunately, which is a shame. This version gives the original graphics a bit of gloss, but doesn't do much to resolve the issues that frustrating controls and overall slow pace caused with the game's original release.

The game follows three characters: Ren Hojo, Yuri Kozukata, and Miku Hinasaki, as they explore Hikami Mountain, dotted with a variety of shrines. It's known primarily as a location where

people have gone and committed suicide in the past, and as such is supposedly swarming with the ghosts of shrine maidens who died there in the past. When those shrine maidens begin popping up in the waters found throughout the region surrounding Hikami Mountain, our protagonists get involved—and the only way they can fight back is with, you guessed it, the Camera Obscura from the rest of the games.



The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD

Second time's the charm!



PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Nintendo

SYSTEM(S)
Switch

RATING
E

Over the last decade, Nintendo has focused on porting older *Legend of Zelda* games to the latest console, which has left some fans of the series antsy for information on the development of *Breath of the Wild 2*. It was only a matter of time before

Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword got its own high-definition remake, too.

Fans who were once disappointed in a lack of updates

on *BOTW2* rejoiced over the *Skyward Sword HD* news. Released over ten years ago, marking the franchise's 25th anniversary, *Skyward Sword* was the last new game before *Breath of the Wild* and set the stage for what is possible in the series. Many of the innovations returning for *BOTW*, *SS* emphasized an immersive style of play that many appreciated.

Skyward Sword claimed a lot of firsts, includ-

ing the first game in the official timeline. Being the origin story of the *Legend of Zelda* series, *SS* had to be special, and it was. It gave fans a type of story so many of us craved—one that showed a more human



side to Link and Zelda, making them vulnerable as they set out on their fated journeys. Being able to relive the story on the Switch brought back treasured memories of my first



time playing it. (I did not, however, miss the Silent Realm.)

With HD remakes, there is always a bit of skepticism that comes with them—are refreshed graphics really worth \$60? Let me answer that for you: in this case, yes. Set apart by its bright and painterly art style, *Skyward Sword* in HD looks fantastic. The HD remake is like playing *SS* with 20/20 vision; the game is crisp and even more stunning than the original. Compared to the first, the 2021 version's most noticeable update is the smoothed-out pixels. Graphics no longer have that "crunchy" texture and objects

Fatal Frame is well known for putting players in terrifying positions where their only recourse against the ghostly enemies is to take a photo of them. The Camera Obscura has the ability to obliterate the ghosts you take pictures of, and that's how you get through these horrifying encounters. That's old hat for players who might have seen the other games. But this entry's gimmick has to do with a special wetness meter. Given the ghosts' propensity to hide out in the water, the wetter your character gets, the more powerful they'll become, and the more damage they'll take.

So you'll be traversing a mountainous area teeming with ghosts, punctuated by watery areas that could spell your doom. That's frustrating already, but the pacing and controls make it even more mind-numbing at times. Of course, having to deal with the ghosts that appear can be frightening in the way that jump scares are, but the amount of back-tracking and plodding from area to area begin to diminish those feelings a bit.

The combat itself, which involves capturing photos of ghostly weak points to score more points and cause more damage, has felt inventive in the past with other parts of the *Fatal Frame* series. Here, it's only exciting for a while until you need to head back and forth for the fifth or sixth



time. Compounded by the fact that certain enemies take quite a while to defeat, this only adds to the mounting frustration that builds as you make your way through the game.

Of course, you could overlook all those issues, as many Japanese survival horror games tend

to feature, if it weren't for the awful controls. They're absolutely terrible, and the fact that the game is now on Switch apparently means nothing. The characters feel clunky and frustrating to navigate with, and the camera is absolutely no help. Sometimes it gets stuck. Sometimes the character you're using doesn't turn quickly enough to avoid certain danger. In horror games, every second counts. Unfortunately, here, you don't get to make much of the time you're afforded, and that takes away the tension and scares that you could be experiencing. Instead, annoyance sets in. It's not a good look.

These pitfalls make it frustrating for horror fans and *Fatal Frame* fans alike, as this is the series' first foray into the next-gen life cycle. Little or no care was put into bringing *Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water* to the Switch, and it's clear in nearly every facet of the game. There is one silver lining, though, and it's more abundantly available than before. On the other hand, it's just a shame this is the only *Fatal Frame* we've gotten on

a much more capable platform. Hopefully, the series continues on PlayStation 5 or Xbox Series X in the future with a proper update and a new adventure, or at the very least, a version for Switch fans that corrects these issues.

—Brittany Vincent

in the distance and background environments overall are clearer. This is especially noticeable when on Skyloft, traversing the surface, or scouring dungeons.

Nintendo also threw in a few quality-of-life features for good measure, removing the clunky bits. You can now pick up items without being reminded you picked up an amber relic or blue rupee, fast forward text, skip cut scenes, as well as make Fi's updates and assistance completely optional. One thing that is missed is the quirky Sheikah Stone that gave video hints throughout the game. Now, of course, I may be the only one who actually liked having it around for extra help, but nonetheless, its presence will be missed.

The biggest upgrades to the HD version are the revamped motion controls and optional button-only controls. The motion controls were supposed to be smoothed out on the Switch, but I found it rather difficult to use and very jittery due to the gyroscope. I do not have a steady hand, so playing with a sensitive controller led me to recenter the cursor constantly, making battles and normal gameplay difficult. I

preferred playing with the button-only controls. Once getting down the action buttons and learning how to use the camera, I felt more confident playing. I could swing consistently and efficiently with the analog stick and not have to struggle with



the touchy gyroscope.

Having the chance to revisit *Skyward Sword* rekindled my love for the game. The title is pivotal to the series, changing the way Nintendo approaches the franchise. If you missed the original back in 2011, you absolutely want to play the HD version to fully grasp its importance to the series and the fate of future reincarnations. The stunning watercolor-esque graphics, immersive story, and innovative motion controls



helped define a generation of *Zelda* games and to now have it in HD, shows off the masterpiece that it truly is.

—Brianna Fox-Priest

The Premade Life

In the previous issue, we discussed purchasing and modifying premade cosplays. Now let's take a look at another way in which cosplay has been made more accessible to all fans. While purchasing premade cosplays from an online store is a quick and easy option, commissioning a cosplay from another cosplay creator not only nets you a cosplay that is tailor-made for you and your body, but your purchase helps support independent creators in the cosplay community.

The easiest resource for finding commissions is on Etsy. Many cosplayers use the site to set up shop and offer commissions on a case-by-case basis. Another option is to do a quick Google search for cosplayers with independent websites set up for commissions. The Replica Prop Forum allows creators to create posts offering their services and cosplayers can post in search of a cosplay to be created. There are also Facebook groups dedicated to cosplay commissions or that allow commission posts on buy-and-sell groups.

Any time you're looking for someone to create a cosplay for you, keep in mind that the cost will be higher than creating it yourself or purchasing a pre-made cosplay from a large website. You will not only be paying for the materials needed but also the time the creator needs to make the cosplay. Labor is not free. Because you are paying a premium for your cosplay, you'll want to choose wisely from whom you commission. Check for photos of their previous work and reviews from other customers.

Once you've picked a creator to commission from, make sure to get all aspects of the job written out in a contract and agreed upon by both parties. This includes price, deadlines for payments, progress report or cosplay due dates, delivery details and materials needed. Also include any penalties for late payments (if paying in installments) or late delivery.

Now for the other side. If you've got the construction ability and business mindfulness needed, you can help finance your cosplay hobby by providing commissions for other cosplayers. There are several things to consider before jumping into offering your services. The most important is, do you have the time and motivation available to create costumes within a set time frame? Once a contract is set, commissioners should always stick to their deadlines. Missing these can generate bad reviews and word-of-mouth, things fatal for generating further business.

You will also need to be able to accurately determine the costs of materials needed to create each piece, the amount of time it will take to construct, and some knowledge of setting up a payment-processing accounts (like PayPal) and creating invoices and contracts. In terms of construction, you will want to be comfortable with creating costumes based on measurements alone, as most commissions will be placed by customers too far away for traditional fitting sessions.

Don't let yourself get overwhelmed with the amount of work you put on your plate! You don't want to skimp on quality in order to make deadlines. With careful planning and preparation, you can start a business that helps you make money to fund your own cosplays. And here you have the circle of cosplay commissions.

Ani-Mia links

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Animia.cosplay

Twitter: www.twitter.com/AniMiaOfficial

Instagram: www.instagram.com/animiaofficial



SonSon
Photography



Brian Ngai Photography



Brian Ngai
Photography



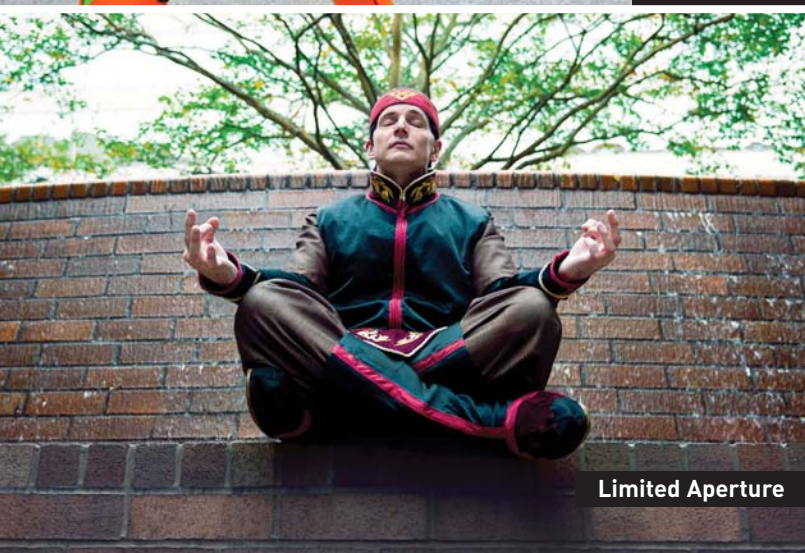
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Stefan Lane Creative



Limited Aperture



SonSon Photography



Brian Ngai Photography



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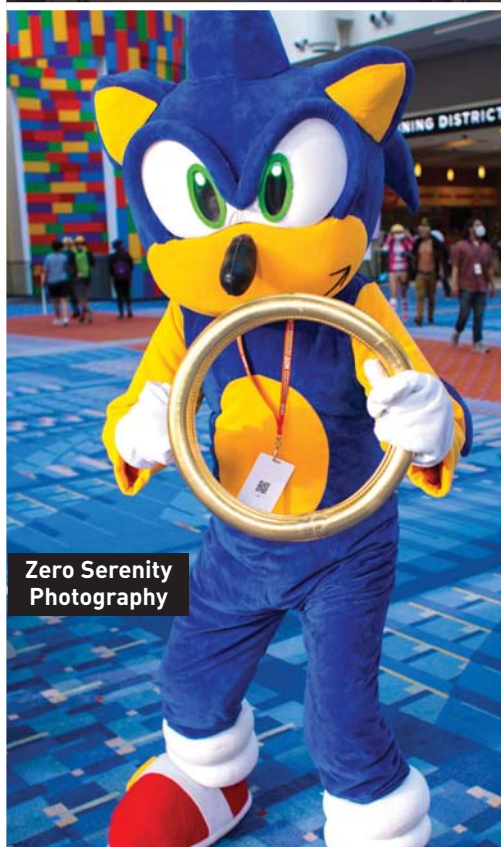
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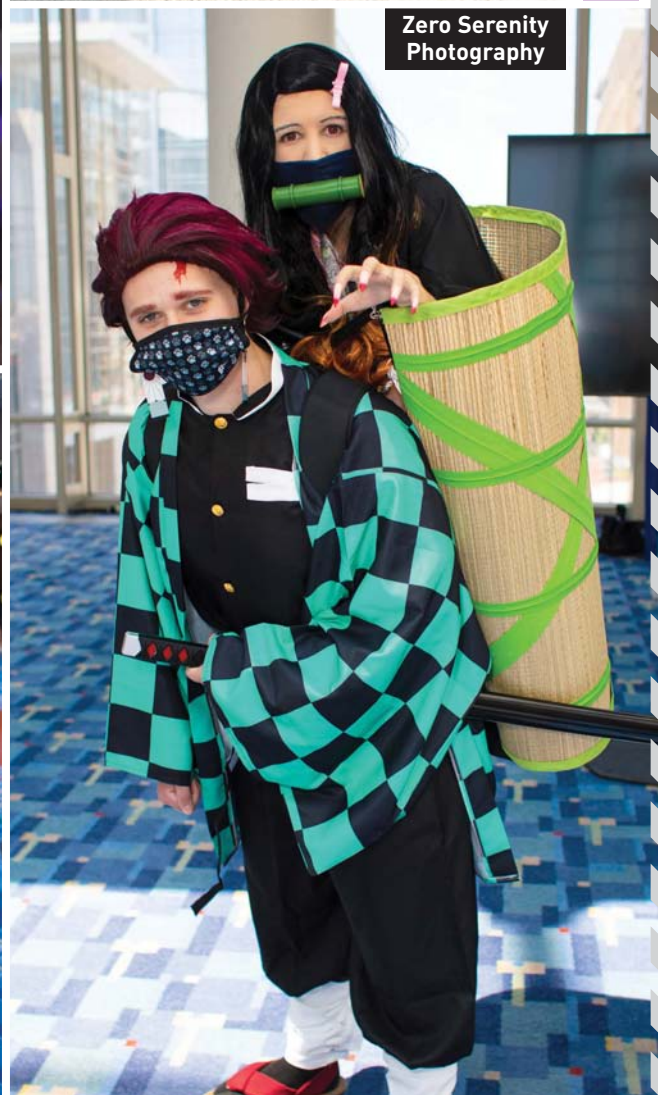
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The Sea of Stars!

An interview with Jérôme Alquié about his new Space Pirate Captain Harlock comic

French artist Jérôme Alquié grew up with anime being aired in France, and these days it's paying off. He's working with Leiji Matsumoto on the comic Space Pirate Captain Harlock from ABLAZE Publishing, which is currently being published. And he is working on a Saint Seiya comic with Masami Kurumada. He spoke to Otaku USA about his fandom, getting to know Matsumoto, and what he aims to produce with his take on Captain Harlock.

You grew up with anime in the '80s. How did you first discover anime, and what about them interested you?

I must have been about three years old when I started watching Japanese cartoons on TV. In France, they arrived in 1978 with the *Robot Goldorak* (UFO Robot Grendizer), of which all the kids were fans. Other space opera cartoons followed such as *Ulysses 31*, Edmond Hamilton's *Captain Future* as well as *Captain Harlock*, which was called *Captain Albator*. They were very important to me because they were my heroes and playmates and the ones that made me want to start drawing.

Captain Harlock was highly successful in France. What attracted you to Space Pirate Captain Harlock in particular?

I (re)discovered (*Captain Harlock*) in the '90s when I was a little older. I enjoyed the different layers of the show which can be addressed to children with the pirate elements that are still very impressive but also its other themes such as ecology, humanism, immortality ... these kinds of things that you don't see the same way when you're seven years old or 20 years old.

I find Harlock particularly charismatic, romantic, embodied with a sense of self-sacrifice and honor and a lot of poetry, which are present in all of the works of its author Leiji Matsumoto. This character, I fell in love with him in 1994 [and] it has never left me.

How did you and Leiji Matsumoto work together on your Harlock comic?

It was a great collaboration. Everything I did passed into the hands of the master, whether from the scenario to the dialogue, or from the storyboard to the final boards. We were able to evolve certain things to be perfectly in line with his original work while respecting the new points that I wanted to explore.

He was very supportive, always full of kindness and encouragement. He is a great author, who has created so many things and who is very generous and open-minded. I love his work because it is in the continuity of his life, and I



appreciate the man so much when I see how much he loves and talks about his work. I couldn't have dreamed of a better collaboration. And our meeting was unforgettable!

How will your Harlock comic be similar and at the same time different from what Matsumoto has published?

It's a question that completely sums up what I've been trying to produce: something faithful and different at the same time.

I believe that people who have discovered the anime or manga of Leiji Matsumoto will find all the ingredients, the characters, the dialogue, their adventures. Many fans have told me that they have found in these comics the hero of their childhood. It was clearly something that I strove for, so that the nostalgic thread works and that the fans feel a little youthful for a few moments ... fidelity to the original work was very important to me and sensei Matsumoto shared this point of view.

And at the same time, I wanted to deal with different things, adding new characters that would change the dynamic, and especially allow enemies to become allies (oops, I spoil too much, there!). I wanted to emphasize the relationship between Harlock and Mayu his goddaughter, as I saw her with the eyes of the dad that I am today. I tried to talk about ecology with earth's cooling (even if it is the opposite in reality), to highlight even more how the enemies, The Mazons, live in symbiosis with nature that they are a kind of metaphor for nature's revenge on man who destroys the planet ... all these things! And the difference also comes



from the format, the drawing method, the coloring process.

You said it all in the question: I tried to do something personal and new, but with as much respect as possible for the original work. And I sincerely believe that this balance has been achieved with *Space Pirate Captain Harlock*.

What can you tell us about the Saint Seiya comic you are working on with Masami Kurumada?

I am a fan of this series. It's definitely the anime I've seen the most times in my life. I watched every episode, every day, every week, from my 14th to my 18th birthday!

I am very proud and very happy to work in collaboration with sensei Kurumada on this project. Unfortunately, I can't reveal much to you at the moment, except that I'm working on it.

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